

A detailed black and white illustration of a library or study. A man stands on a high shelf, reaching for a book. Below him, several people are engaged in reading or study. One man is seated in the foreground, looking at a book. Another man is standing to the right, holding a newspaper. The shelves are filled with books, and the overall atmosphere is one of intellectual pursuit.

# WRITING AND THINKING IN CONTEMPORARY ACADEMIA

THE POETICS OF CLARITY

MARTIN GRÜNFELD



# Writing and Thinking in Contemporary Academia

Across disciplinary borders, clarity is taken for granted as a cardinal virtue of communication in contemporary academia. But what is clarity, how is it practised in writing across disciplinary borders and how does it affect our ways of researching and thinking? This book explores such questions by scrutinising the ideal of clarity beyond its apparently self-evident value. Through a multi-methodological empirical analysis of the ideal of clarity, the author offers a sketch of what is termed ‘the poetics of clarity’, which is unfolded as a field of tension with important implications for sentence formation, authorial positioning and textual organisation. By way of a series of reflections on the possible consequences of this for thinking, this volume also explores the parts of knowledge production that may be marginalised, especially poetic language use, biases, interests and contexts, multi-dimensional arguments and errors. Revealing a positivist bias and a regime of high-speed consumption that characterise what, in certain regards, might be considered a productive space for knowledge production, *Writing and Thinking in Contemporary Academia* will appeal to scholars with interests in the sociology of knowledge, continental philosophy, the philosophy of science and academic writing.

**Martin Grünfeld** is Assistant Professor in Metabolic Science in Culture at Medical Museion and the Novo Nordisk Foundation Center for Basic Metabolic Research at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark.



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# Writing and Thinking in Contemporary Academia

The Poetics of Clarity

**Martin Grünfeld**



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Thank you for your love and wisdom**





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# Introductory remarks

## The question of clarity

Muddiness is not merely a disturber of prose, it is also a destroyer of life, of hope: death on the highway caused by a badly worded road sign, heartbreak among lovers caused by a misplaced phrase in a well-intentioned letter, anguish of a traveler expecting to be met at a railroad station and not being met because of a slipshod telegram. Think of the tragedies that are rooted in ambiguity, and be clear!<sup>1</sup>

*Clarity is a matter of life or death!* This hyperbolic statement finds its literal meaning in the opening quotation: ‘death on the highway caused by a badly worded road sign’. Yet clarity is not only important in everyday communication but a hallmark ideal of academic writing. In academic writing, the ‘risk of death’ can be taken metaphorically to express the danger that research articles never get published because they do not conform to a set of shared demands of style, are never read or quoted or perhaps are misunderstood and misrepresented. Thus, clarity is also a matter of life or death for scientific authors, who rely on an academic credit system embodied in institutionalised writing practices to build up merit and pursue their careers.<sup>2</sup> However, clarity is a matter of life or death not merely for authors but also plays a vital role in the progression of knowledge.

Knowledge production depends on the sharing of knowledge within a community. One of the earliest scientific journals, *The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, commences with an emphasis on enabling the circulation of knowledge for knowledge to progress. As Oldenburg, the first editor, writes in his introduction: ‘there is nothing more necessary for promoting the improvement of Philosophical Matters, than the communicating of such’.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge production depends on writing to render ideas of transmissibility and accumulation plausible.<sup>4</sup> Not just any kind of writing, however, but a kind of writing that (ideally) leaves the content untouched – writing characterised by transparency and clarity. For example, the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA)* emphasises that,

just as each investigator benefits from the publication process, so the body of scientific literature depends for its vitality on the active participation of individual investigators. Authors of scientific articles contribute most to the literature when they communicate clearly and concisely.<sup>5</sup>



## 2 *Introductory remarks*

Similarly, but from a theoretical standpoint, Husserl argues that within the scientific community a shared responsibility for living knowledge exists founded on the univocal use of language.<sup>6</sup> Hence, from Husserl's reflections on writing to present day manuals of style, we find a resonance emphasising the importance of communicating clearly. At the heart of knowledge exchange, lies the ability to communicate clearly to contribute to the scientific community and secure its continued vitality. No wonder then that clarity is generally conceived as a self-evident favourable attribute of academic writing.

Today clarity is ascribed a positive value as normatively designating the proper way of communicating knowledge. This ascription of positive value is visible across disciplinary borders as a trans-disciplinary ideal.<sup>7</sup> Clarity appears as a crucial attribute of academic writing, but perhaps because of its central position it is often taken for granted as a common good. Most books dealing with clarity today concern academic writing and in such writing guides clarity is widely championed.<sup>8</sup> But while it is easy to be blinded by the virtues of clarity, I have found it important to explore what may lurk in the shadows of this self-given ideal. Because in our praise of the virtues of clarity, we may overlook the limitations it imposes on research. In this book, my aim is to explore the ideal of clarity across disciplinary borders to understand what the ideal of clarity entails and reflect upon its implications for thinking within contemporary academia. This is important because there are strong tendencies towards the standardisation and homogenising of academic discourse today.

These aims crystalise into two main questions: *what is the ideal of clarity operative within contemporary academic writing, and what are the consequences of this ideal for thinking within academia?*

These questions are interdependent, and their force lies in the meeting point between empirical analyses (what is the ideal of clarity?) and theoretical reflections (what are the consequences for thinking?), perhaps similar to the fictive meeting point exemplified above between the prescriptions of the *Publication Manual of APA* and Husserl's theoretical reflections on writing. Without empirical analyses, my theoretical reflections would risk becoming groundless suspicions. Yet, without the theoretical reflections, my exploration of the ideal of clarity would risk becoming just another writing guide. Hence, the questions gain a heuristic force by being brought together. By bringing the questions together, I aim at exploring whether the ideal of clarity privileges specific ways of thinking within contemporary academia. From the outset, I do not wish to define *thinking* because a definition would constrain the possibility of answering the questions from the beginning.<sup>9</sup> Instead, I try to stay open in my exploration of clarity. Yet, despite my intent to stay open, I recognise that pursuing answers to the questions could follow many paths and I do not pretend to have found the one true path. Indeed, I encourage my readers to find their own way and use my book as an invitation to reflect. Moreover, because there has been very little written about the relationship between ideals of writing and thinking, this book is also a call for further research. The specific path I have chosen in my exploration of these questions is formed by a conceptual horizon shaped by Rancière's *poetics of knowledge*, especially his



connection of poetics and the thinkable. In the following section, I will describe this conceptual horizon in more detail.

### The conceptual horizon: Rancière's poetics of knowledge

In *Les noms de l'histoire*, Rancière develops his *poetics of knowledge* (*poétique du savoir*) as a study of poetic regimes comprising rules and literary procedures of differentiation and legitimisation in historical writing (for a thorough walkthrough see Appendix I).<sup>10</sup> However, it is important to notice that according to Rancière, poetic regimes not only set up a framework for writing but also have implications for the *thinkable*.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, his poetics of knowledge becomes more than a description of poetic norms. Rather, it unfolds as a polemical challenging of poetic norms to redistribute the thinkable. Rancière explicates this polemical dimension in a later reformulation of the poetics of knowledge as a *method of equality* that emphasises the possibilities for challenging established borders and hierarchies between discourses.<sup>12</sup> A crucial premise for Rancière is that while poetic regimes may distribute the thinkable in particular ways it is always possible for thought to escape.<sup>13</sup> This duality leads to a tension at the heart of Rancière's poetics of knowledge between poetic norms and singular voices.<sup>14</sup> Instead of attempting to abolish this tension, it is important to realise that it can play a productive role in the study of academic writing as an indeterminate space between poetic ideals and writing practices. Thus, Rancière's poetics of knowledge is more than a study of the rules of knowledge production – it is an egalitarian polemic against borders and hierarchies of discourses.

By linking poetic norms to the thinkable, I wish to open a critical questioning of the consequences of a poetics for thinking. Specifically, three aspects of Rancière's poetics of knowledge form the conceptual horizon. First, similar to the dual stream between poetic norms and singular voices, I focus on poetic rules and textual variances. Second, because of the disruption of hierarchies between discourses, Rancière opens a trans-disciplinary perspective (what he calls *indisciplinary*) that is operative in my analysis of poetic ideals and texts. From this conceptual horizon, I focus on the ideal of clarity as a core concept within academia today across disciplinary borders and in relation to other concepts that altogether constitute a set of rules and principles for academic writing that are embodied to varying degrees textually. Thus, I set out to develop a sketch of the ideal of clarity as constituting what I designate as a *poetics of clarity* that demarcates a space for writing and thinking within academia today. Third, Rancière's poetics of knowledge is not a readymade theoretical framework that can be transposed to other contexts but rather characterised by a fundamental openness and fluidity. This fluidity and openness ensures that a poetics of knowledge remains sensitive to the empirical material. Instead of resting on a contextually detached theoretical viewpoint with pre-defined concepts akin to a *philosophical autism* that isolates the thinker within an artificial world of concepts and theories,<sup>15</sup> I see my work in opposition to such a philosophical autism as a sustained improvisation in the encounter between theoretical discussion and empirical material.<sup>16</sup>



***Empirical material and methods***

While the questions I address are general, my exploration is limited not only by the conceptual horizon but also by my choices of empirical material and methods. From the outset, I have delimited my exploration of the poetics of clarity to academic journals, because, since its inauguration in 1665, journal writing has gradually come to prominence as the dominant way of circulating knowledge, and thus as the natural habitat of the ideal of clarity. My exploration of the ideal of clarity is based on a multi-methodological analysis of a variety of empirical material that I will briefly describe now (for more details, see Appendix II).

The empirical material comprises authorial guidelines from 50 academic journals and one randomly selected research article from each journal, as well as six influential manuals of style and four general writing guides (for a list of the empirical material, see the Works cited section). I chose 40 journals from four different disciplines (ten from each of the following disciplines: neuroscience, sociology, literary studies, and philosophy) as well as ten of the overall top ranking academic journals in the world. Within each discipline, I selected five high- and five low-ranked journals. I included both high- and low-impact journals to examine potential tensions and dispersions in writing practices and ideals and identify potential patterns across disciplines or ranking. Furthermore, I restricted my selection to journals in the English language because it has become the prevalent international language of science.

I approach the empirical material from multiple analytical perspectives adapted to the different material and altogether aiming at sketching out the poetics of clarity. First, I explore the authorial guidelines, manuals of style, and general writing guides through a *conceptual analysis* of the ideal of clarity and the explicit rules of academic writing. In the conceptual analysis, I analyse a set of recurring related concepts that form a conceptual network revolving around the ideal of clarity. Second, I employ a *multi-dimensional textual analysis* to explore writing procedures and ideals in research articles. While the conceptual analysis produces a preliminary sketch of the poetics of clarity, the multi-dimensional textual analysis nuances, expands, and differentiates it. The analysis of writing procedures in research articles is based on *close readings* of nine randomly selected articles (two from each discipline, one from a high-impact journal and one from a low-impact journal as well as one article from one of the overall top journals) and an *explorative quantitative analysis* of 50 research articles (one from each journal). In the close readings, I analyse textual patterns and significant details in relation to the sketch of the poetics of clarity developed in the conceptual analysis. An explorative quantitative textual analysis based on linguistic computational analyses of word use and grammatical categories in the research articles complements the close readings. The analyses develop as a back-and-forth movement between the different analytical perspectives that complement and cross-fertilise each other.

Through this multi-dimensional analytical strategy, I sketch out the poetics of clarity, which provides the ground for my further theoretical reflections on the consequences for thinking. However, I do not claim that my analyses



account for the writing practices of a whole discipline or set of disciplines. On the contrary, my analyses and interpretations cannot be generalised in a straightforward way.

## Outline

The two main questions organise the book and divide it into two main parts: first, a descriptive empirical analysis of the ideal of clarity, and second a critical-polemical discussion of what the ideal of clarity may entail for thinking within academia today.

In Part I, ‘The poetics of clarity in contemporary academic writing’, I explore the poetics of clarity from multi-dimensional analytical perspectives on various empirical sources. Interestingly, despite the wide acceptance of clarity as an ideal for contemporary academic writing, as soon as we pay attention to the concept of clarity it appears to be anything but clear. The part begins with a conceptual analysis of poetic ideals setting off from the concept of clarity, as it is operative in authorial guidelines and manuals of style (Chapter 1, ‘The idealised plane of poetics: core concepts and ideals’). In this chapter, I sketch out the conceptual network underpinning academic writing, especially how the ideal of clarity relates closely to concepts such as *readability*, *precision*, and a *textual economy of necessity*. Yet, as I show, at the conceptual level, the poetics of clarity is not a harmonious unity but a field of tension. After the initial conceptual analysis, I analyse specific aspects of academic writing by complementing the conceptual analysis with a multi-dimensional textual analysis of research articles. First, I explore the level of sentence formation focusing on word choice and sentence structures (Chapter 2, ‘The formation of sentences’). In this analysis, I illustrate the textual resemblances and variations within the poetics of clarity. Second, I analyse authorial positioning in academic writing, especially the use of voice and first-person pronouns (Chapter 3, ‘Researchers-in-the-texts’). Across disciplinary borders, I show that there is a tendency of depersonalisation. However, as I also show, there appears to be a discrepancy between the poetics of authorial effacement and general poetic ideals of clarity. Third, I explore the ideals of textual structures inherent in the poetics of clarity and the degrees of standardisation of structural organisation (Chapter 4, ‘Textual structures of research articles’). I show that even though the structures of the texts and the poetic ideals pertaining to textual structure differ between the disciplines, most of the disciplines share a set of poetic ideals of textual organisation, namely *textual atomism*, and *logical succession*. Based on these multiple analytical perspectives and levels of analysis, I produce a sketch of the poetics of clarity in contemporary academic writing that shows how it comprises a series of tensions at work on different levels. Gradually, I unfold the poetics of clarity as a multi-dimensional field of tension that organises the production of research articles in academia today.

In Part II, ‘Reflections on the consequences for thinking’, I begin by discussing the distinction between form and content inherent in the poetics of clarity



(Chapter 5, ‘The unstable distinction between form and content’). I argue that the privileging of the content within the poetics of clarity rests on a demarcation of form and content, which, nonetheless, ties them together because the form must blend in naturally with the content. This discussion sets the scene for a series of reflections on the consequences of the poetics of clarity for thinking. These reflections circulate around a negative dialectic: the poetics of clarity is paramount for the progression of knowledge yet it also subordinates crucial parts of knowledge production and potentially constrains thinking within academia. I explore this negative dialectic from various angles. First, I discuss the question of sentence formation and argue that the demarcation of academic language within the poetics of clarity, particularly the banishment of poetic language, imports an element of conservatism into the core of knowledge production (Chapter 6, ‘Phrase regimes, genres, and the expulsion of metaphors’). Second, I turn to the poetics of authorial effacement and argue that it risks knowledge progression by effacing biases, interests, and contexts (Chapter 7, ‘Authorial effacement and the suppression of contexts, biases, interests’). From this viewpoint, I develop the argument that the poetics of authorial effacement turns clarity into a selective clarity that not only uncovers but also covers up. Third, I discuss how structural demands may create templates for thinking possibly privileging specific parts of academic work (Chapter 8, ‘Textual structures as templates for thinking’). I argue that thinking within a standardised template may yield a clearer univocal picture of reality, but it possibly undermines knowledge progression by leaving out errors and represses alternate ways of thinking. After discussing the potential consequences for thinking directly related to the three levels of language use analysed in Part I, I unfold two broader perspectives. First, building upon the previous chapters, I argue that the selective and restrictive conception of clarity is based on a set of assumptions about the objects of knowledge and the knowing subject that resonates with positivism (Chapter 9, ‘Thinking the limits and the limits for thinking: the inherent positivist bias’). My main argument in the chapter is that the inherent positivist bias may restrict thinking within the poetics of clarity and lead to a homogenising of perspectives and methods. Second, I end Part II by discussing a specific regime of speed characterised by a preference for the possibility of a rapid consumption of texts inscribed within the poetics of clarity (‘Chapter 10, Clarity – a potential acceleration of thinking?’). I argue that the inscription of reading and thinking within a regime of speed may accelerate thinking but can also inhibit thinking because of the demand of high-speed thought without time for reflection.

### ***Reflexivity: writing about writing***

Writing is a matter every academic seems to have an opinion about and, at times, strong convictions (including myself). Thus, to write about writing is to enter into a minefield of disputes and disagreement. From the outset, I am afraid that I will disappoint the reader who probably has a set of specific expectations and presuppositions about what academic writing and clarity are. I do not pretend to cover the matter of academic writing in its entirety. On the contrary, I see



my contribution as a partial perspective that focuses specifically on the ideal of clarity within a limited empirical and theoretical scope. My questioning of the ideal has been formed by a general suspicion that the ideal of clarity may not be as neutral as it seems. Thus, from the outset, my exploration of the poetics of clarity has been coloured by expectations and presuppositions, yet I have tried to stay as nuanced as possible, and I believe my sketch of the poetics of clarity attest to this. Nonetheless, it is important to admit that my initial approach has been suspicious and polemical, and my reflections on the consequences for thinking embody this suspicious stance. Even though I try to remain open, in my exploration of the consequences for thinking, I have implicitly presupposed that the possibility of a plurality of ways of thinking is important to defend. This presupposition has been inherently operative in my exploration possibly because of my background in twentieth-century French philosophy, which ascribes value to *difference*, *multiplicity*, and *heterogeneity*.<sup>17</sup> I do not claim to have reached a set of final indisputable conclusions. Rather, I aim at opening a set of indeterminate tensions within the poetics of clarity that enables a questioning of the conditions for writing and thinking within contemporary academia.

To write about writing also imports a constant movement of self-reflexivity and self-questioning, because when I write an academic book I risk enrolling in the very poetics I analyse and criticise. So, my exploration is not independent of the specific demands of the regime. Indeed, my text has been subjected to some of the demands that I discuss. For example, one of my reviewers positively remarks that ‘the writing is generally clear and readable’. To write entails participating in a poetic regime and to write critically about clarity puts my efforts within a conundrum: how do I write about writing? This question has been present throughout my writing process, and particularly the problem of placing my writing within or outside the confines of the poetics of clarity has opened an apparent paradox: if I argue that the poetics of clarity may entail a constraining of thinking, then if I write within the confines of the poetics of clarity, I either accept that my thinking has been constrained or provide a performative counter-argument to my claim. Thereby, I risk that my arguments and conclusions turn against my writing and establish tensions and contradictions.<sup>18</sup> And yet, if I choose to write beyond the confines of the poetics of clarity, I risk that my text will not fit within the demands of contemporary academia and may not be heard within the relevant fields. However, throughout my writing process, a possible way out emerged along the lines of my sketch of the poetics of clarity as a multi-dimensional field of tension. First, the poetics of clarity contains a wide range of possibilities for thinking. Second, it overlaps and intermingles with other poetics. Hence, rather than choosing between conformism and transgression, it is possible to write within the confines of the poetics of clarity and exploit the inherent tensions and potentials for transgression. I utilise this potential of variance by writing the two main parts in different styles oriented towards conformism (the descriptive-analytical Part I) and transgression (the critical-polemical Part II) respectively. Hence, when I write about clarity, I simultaneously conform with and challenge its regime of writing – my writing is touched by and touches it.



Now, without further theoretical or methodological reflections and provisos, I invite the reader to join me in the exploration of the poetics of clarity as a space for writing and thinking within academia today.

## Notes

- 1 William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York, NY: Longman, 2000), 79.
- 2 See Neal S. Young, John P.A. Ioannidis, and Omar Al-Ubaydli, 'Why Current Publication Practices May Distort Science. The Market for Exchange of Scientific Information: The Winner's Curse, Artificial Scarcity, and Uncertainty in Biomedical Publication', *PLoS Medicine* 5, no. 10 (2008), 2.
- 3 Henry Oldenburg, 'The Introduction', *The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, no. 1 (1665), 1.
- 4 See also Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1967), 187.
- 5 American Psychological Association, *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 9.
- 6 Edmund Husserl, 'Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem', *Revue internationale de philosophie* 1, no. 2 (1939), 213.
- 7 As Sword has shown, the concept of clarity appears in a majority of writing guides across disciplinary borders (Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 28). By trans-disciplinary, however, I do not mean that clarity is a universal perhaps ahistorical ideal of academic writing, but precisely that it is an ideal that transgresses disciplinary borders without necessarily being the only ideal of academic writing.
- 8 Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 26.
- 9 If I for example define *thinking* either within a rationalistic framework as a formal process of abstraction from the objects of thought or similar to Heidegger as productive and world-disclosing, the specific definition will preform my answer and delimit the perspective. While a rationalistic definition of *thinking* may favour a specific form of logical and conceptual thinking, a Heideggerian definition would from the outset exclude science as well as most academic research from the realm of thinking (see e.g. Martin Heidegger, *Was heisst Denken* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1971), 3 and Emma Williams, *The Ways We Think* (Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 226–228). Neither definition would be particularly useful for my exploration because any narrow definition would unproductively limit the exploration. Thus, from the beginning, I have assumed that thinking does occur within academia, and my reflections do not concern a binary question of the kind: is thinking possible within the poetics of clarity?
- 10 Jacques Rancière, *Les noms de l'histoire. Essai de poétique du savoir* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), 21.
- 11 Rancière, *Les noms de l'histoire*, 204.
- 12 Jacques Rancière, 'Thinking Between Disciplines: An Aesthetics of Knowledge', *Parrhesia* 1 (2006), 10–12.
- 13 See also Peter Hallward, 'Jacques Rancière and the Subversion of Mastery', *Paragraph* 28 (2005), 26.
- 14 Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts, 'Jacques Rancière: *Thinker of Dissensus*', in *Jacques Rancière. History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 4.
- 15 Here, I am inspired by Sloterdijk's description of how thinking creates an artificial autism that isolates the thinker (see Peter Sloterdijk, *Scheintod im Denken. Von Philosophie und Wissenschaft als Übung*. (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), 50).



- 16 In a similar vein, Lyotard sees philosophy as a sustained improvisation that must keep in motion in contrast to being a systematic doctrine or routine procedure (Jean-François Lyotard, *Le différend* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1983), 13–14).
- 17 See Gabriel Rockhill, *Interventions in Contemporary Thought: History, Politics, Aesthetics*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 119–120, for an excellent discussion of the fundamental normative field structuring the *philosophy of difference*.
- 18 The problematic runs parallel with Derrida's critique of Foucault's *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* as written in the language of rationality, whereby madness remains silenced and negative (see Jacques Derrida, 'Cogito et histoire de la folie', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 68, no. 4 (1963): 460–494). Likewise, it can be questioned to what extent my exploration remains within the confines of the poetics of clarity and thereby does not exemplify alternate possibilities of thinking or show that they are possible within.





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## Part I

# The poetics of clarity in contemporary academic writing

In academia, *clarity* is conceived as a self-evidently favourable attribute of scientific communication. But what is this ideal of clarity and how is it textually embodied? These questions form my path into the background of contemporary academic writing – the poetics of clarity. Through my exploration of various empirical sources from multiple analytical perspectives, I will sketch out this poetics of clarity. However, as I will show, the poetics of clarity cannot be understood as a harmonious space for textual production uniting texts and disciplines. Rather, the poetics of clarity comprises a series of tensions at work at different levels. In this part, I will gradually unfold the poetics of clarity as a multi-dimensional field of tension that organises the production of research articles today.





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# 1 The idealised plane of poetics

## Core concepts and ideals

I begin my exploration of the poetics of clarity at the conceptual level of poetic ideals. In the authorial guidelines and manuals of style, the concept of clarity features in a prominent position. However, this position is neither stable nor conceptually clear. In my analysis of the concept of *clarity*, I will let this fluidity appear by showing how clarity fluctuates between several other important concepts, particularly readability, precision, and textual economy. I begin my analysis by exploring the general formulations of *clarity as readability* and show how the concept of clarity can be closely related to the importance of accessibility. I analyse how clarity is correlative to an expected or ideal audience, and thus how clarity as readability entails a privileging of the text–reader relationship. After exploring clarity as readability, I show how a counter-description of clarity is also present in the guidelines, which constitute a possible tension between clarity and readability. In my exploration of this tension, I analyse how another central concept related to clarity, namely precision, can lead to a privileging of the text–world relation, and potentially conflict with readability. Thereby, I show how the poetics of clarity is inherently split by the tension *clarity as/or readability*. Finally, I turn to a third concept related to clarity, namely a *textual economy of necessity*. The concept of textual economy is widely distributed across disciplinary borders, and potentially cuts across the divide between readability and precision. Hence, as I will show, the poetics of clarity is not a harmonious unity, but is in a field of tension constituted by the ideals of readability, precision, and a textual economy of necessity. I now wish to unravel this field of tension.

### Readability

To juxtapose clarity and readability is a basic use of clarity that concerns the presentation of material for an audience in a comprehensible way. Consider these examples:

- 1 *Nature* is an international journal covering all the sciences. Contributions should therefore be written clearly and simply so that they are accessible to readers in other disciplines and to readers for whom English is not their first language. Essential but specialized terms should be explained concisely but not didactically.

(*Nature* guidelines)<sup>1</sup>



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- 2 *Souls* favours clearly written articles free of excessive academic jargon and readily accessible to a broad audience.

(*Souls* guidelines)

- 3 Manuscripts must be written in clear and concise English and be intelligible to a broad readership.

(*The EMBO Journal* guidelines)

In the examples, clarity is associated with accessibility. Accessibility concerns a question of access in the sense that comprehension of a text is easily reached. The ideal of accessibility plays on a physical metaphor of ‘getting access to’, for example, ‘getting access to a room through a door’. To get access to a room, you may need a key and when the physical metaphor of accessibility is transformed into a textual ideal of making the content readily understood, the key is clarity. The examples present clarity as a necessary means for the accessibility of research articles, particularly as an important part of scientific exchange, because it enables readers to assess the content. The *Modern Language Association (MLA) Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, which functions as a general writing guide within the humanities also expresses this understanding: ‘the key to successful communication is using the right language for the audience you are addressing’.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on the audience entails that the language of an article must take the audience into account. This specification of clarity in relation to accessibility resonates with Klare’s description of the prevalent definition of readability as the ‘ease of understanding, owing to the style of writing’.<sup>3</sup> Yet, if clarity is juxtaposed with readability, then clarity cannot be understood as a set of independent textual properties, but rather expresses a relation between text and reader.<sup>4</sup> As the examples above illustrate, readability and accessibility are semantically convergent and clarity *as* readability concerns the mediation between text and reader.

In the examples above, it is also worth noticing how clarity as readability is further associated with concepts such as *simplicity* (‘written clearly and simply’) and *conciseness* (‘manuscripts must be written in clear and concise English’). I will return to conciseness later, but here I will focus on the concept of simplicity because it is explicitly presented as a foundation for readability (in some examples such as the *Nature* guidelines). Here are three further examples:

- 1 Clear, simple sentence structure best presents scientific ideas and mathematical formulas.

(*Physical Review Letters* guidelines)

- 2 Although writing only in short, simple sentences produces choppy and boring prose, writing exclusively in long, involved sentences results in difficult, sometimes incomprehensible material. Varied sentence length helps readers maintain interest and comprehension. When involved



concepts require long sentences, the components should proceed logically. Direct, declarative sentences with simple, common words are usually best.

*(Publication Manual of APA, 68)*

3 Simplify and enhance writing by using ‘plain’ language.

*(ASA Style Guide, 8)*<sup>5</sup>

The first example relates *simplicity* to clarity as the basic principle of good scientific writing and describes it as preferable at the level of sentence construction. Meanwhile, the second example unfolds the ideal of simplicity at several levels concerning word choice and sentence type. In this example, simplicity is related to readability in the sense of comprehensibility. Furthermore, the importance of *directness* is underscored together with the choice of words (‘simple common words’) and the preferred type of sentence (‘declarative’). Interestingly, however, while word choice is closely tied to an ideal of simplicity, the construction of sentences is placed within a tension between the ideal of simplicity pertaining to ‘short, simple sentences’ and a risk of dullness, which leads to a prescription of balancing the sentence structures between simple and complex sentences. When dullness appears as something to avoid in academic writing, a tension between complying with the ideal of simplicity and making the text interesting emerges. This also reveals another meaning of readability, namely as being interesting to read. However, as Klare has shown, most often the question of readability primarily concerns the accessibility of texts.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the third example relates simplicity to ‘plain’ language. Thereby, the ideal of simplicity particularly concerns the levels of language use ranging from word choice to sentence construction. At these levels, simplicity particularly involves a reduction of the complexity of the vocabulary and the length and complexity of sentences. Still, the ideal of simplicity is only explicitly visible in very few guidelines in the empirical material. Thus, simplicity cannot be understood as a general dimension of clarity as readability, but rather as a particular and selective dimension sometimes related to clarity.

When clarity is used in the sense as readability or accessibility and eventually associated with simplicity, it closely resembles the first entry in a standard dictionary definition of clarity below:

- 1 the quality of being easily understood
- 2 the quality of being expressed, remembered, understood, etc., in a very exact way
- 3 the quality of being easily seen or heard<sup>7</sup>

The juxtaposition between clarity and readability closely resembles the definition of clarity as ‘the quality of being easily understood’. This definition also fits well with one of the reasons for establishing style rules formulated in the *APA*



*Publication Manual*, namely ‘to increase the ease of reading comprehension’.<sup>8</sup> When clarity is used in compliance with the standard dictionary definition, it indicates that the ideal of clarity is not reflected upon, but is taken for granted as having a clear-cut meaning as readability. This taken for granted meaning of clarity as readability is widely distributed across the disciplines, especially when manuals of style are considered.

### ***Precision***

So far, I have analysed the ideal of clarity in relation to readability. Yet in the guidelines, clarity is not solely presented in compliance with readability, but is also presented in potential opposition with readability. Hence, before we take clarity to mean ‘the quality of being easily understood’, here is a counter-example:

Essays should avoid unnecessary technicality and strive to be accessible to the widest possible audience without sacrificing clarity and rigour.

(*Ethics* guidelines)

The quotation from *Ethics* is remarkable because it juxtaposes clarity and *rigour*, and places clarity in a potential conflict with accessibility. Even though accessibility is seen as important, because of its potential tension with clarity, it becomes an *accessibility putatively without sacrifice*. Thus, clarity and rigour are privileged at the possible expense of narrowing the audience. Consequently, it privileges the text–world relation over the text–reader relation. Unfortunately, this constitution of a tension between clarity and accessibility remains unexplained. Nonetheless, coupling clarity with rigour points in the direction of the second dictionary definition of clarity listed above, as ‘the quality of being expressed in a very exact way’.

While the tension between clarity in the sense of precision and accessibility only appears explicitly in the *Ethics* example, the importance of precision is disseminated widely across the disciplines.<sup>9</sup> Consider these examples:

- 1 *ICMJE* developed these recommendations to review best practice and ethical standards in the conduct and reporting of research and other material published in medical journals, and to help authors, editors, and others involved in peer review and biomedical publishing create and distribute accurate, clear, reproducible, unbiased medical journal articles.

(*International Committee of Medical Journal Editors Recommendations*, 1)<sup>10</sup>

- 2 The prime objective of scientific reporting is clear communication. You can achieve this by presenting ideas in an orderly manner and by expressing yourself smoothly and precisely.

(*Publication Manual of APA*, 65)



- 3 Some co-authors have responsibility for the entire paper as an accurate, verifiable report of the research.

*(PNAS guidelines)*

The above examples illustrate the broad distribution across the disciplines of an ideal of precision in relation to clarity. In the examples, precision and accuracy appear as important for scientific communication. The first example places accuracy alongside clarity. Meanwhile, the second example describes clarity as the prime objective of scientific communication, which is achieved through precision of expression. The third example particularly accentuates the importance of the accuracy of reporting, thus emphasising the importance of the text–world relation. However, the quality of precision might constitute a conflict with a general level of readability because one way to be exact is to use technical terms, which decreases the broad readability of a text substantially. Thus, a potential tension between privileging the text–reader or text–world relationship appears.

One possible solution to the tension is to use a standardised technical vocabulary and accept a narrowing of the readership. In this way, the tension is not resolved but rather dissolved through a redefinition of readability to concern intra-disciplinary rather than inter-disciplinary readers. Even though this solution necessarily will narrow down the potential readership, some guidelines express the advantages of a technical language:

- 1 Short words and short sentences are easier to comprehend than are long ones. A long technical term, however, may be more precise than several short words, and technical terms are inseparable from scientific reporting. Yet the technical terminology in a paper should be readily understood by individuals throughout each discipline. An article that depends on terminology familiar to only a few specialists does not sufficiently contribute to the literature.

*(Publication Manual of APA, 67)*

- 2 Mathematical material can be difficult to present in a clear, concise manner. By nature it is often complex and this makes specialized treatment a necessity. Conventionally accepted notation and standardized forms are an aid both to the author and reader.

*(Physical Review Letters guidelines)*

The first example emphasises the importance of technical terms as inseparable from scientific reporting. This example rearticulates the tension between accessibility and precision as a tension between simplicity and precision. Furthermore, the problem is elaborated as a balancing act between the two. Neither should technical terms be substituted by short words if it entails less precision, nor should the use of technical terms entail that only a few specialists can understand them. Thus, although technical language is important, it must remain comprehensible to a certain number of individuals within a discipline. The second example from



*Physical Review* also describes technical language as a necessity. Interestingly, by emphasising the difficulty of presenting mathematical material in a clear and concise manner, a distinction between form and content is established. Thereby clarity is seen as purely a matter of presentation and contrasted with the complexity of the material, which entails a potential tension in the text–world relation. The tension concerns the problem of how to make complex content accessible. Here technical notation is an aid for both author and reader.

However, another possible response to the tension between text–reader and the text–world relationships is to prioritise broad (inter-disciplinary) readability over precision and restrict technical language use. Perhaps surprisingly, in most of the guidelines, this solution is preferred. Across the disciplines, technical terms occupy an ambiguous position, which can be seen as a consequence of a recurring juxtaposition of technical language with jargon:

- 1 Jargon or unnecessary technical language should be avoided, as should the use of abbreviations (such as code names for conditions).

(*Sociology* guidelines)

- 2 *Jargon* is the continuous use of a technical vocabulary, even in places where that vocabulary is not relevant. Jargon is also the substitution of a euphemistic phrase for a familiar term (e.g. monetarily felt scarcity for poverty), and you should scrupulously avoid using such jargon. Federal bureaucratic jargon has had the greatest publicity, but scientific jargon also grates on the reader, encumbers the communication of information, and wastes space.

(*Publication Manual of APA*, 68)

- 3 Avoid jargon, but do not oversimplify; be accurate and precise throughout.

(*Trends in Cognitive Sciences* guidelines)

The first example expresses a juxtaposition between jargon and unnecessary technical language. Meanwhile, the second example describes jargon somewhat differently as concerning the overuse of technical vocabulary. This definition is in line with the prescription from *Ethics* that unnecessary use (or overuse) of technical terms should be avoided. Interestingly, the continuous use of unnecessary technical vocabulary is even described as a waste of space, which ‘grates on the reader’ and ‘encumbers communication’! The third example pushes it even further: ‘avoid jargon, but do not oversimplify’. The examples juxtapose technical language with jargon and see it as a threat to clarity (as readability). Thereby technical language potentially forms a conflict with the aim of reaching a broad readership. Thus, in these examples, the text–reader relation appears to be given a higher priority than the text–world relation: what matters is accessibility.

The ambivalence between readability and precision is nicely illustrated in the *Publication Manual of APA*, which celebrates the precision of technical terms (‘A long technical term, however, may be more precise than several short words’), while simultaneously emphasising the problem of readability (‘scientific jargon



also grates on the reader, encumbers the communication of information'). This ambivalence points to a difference between two kinds of clarity: *general clarity* and *technical clarity*. While general clarity entails using a common language, technical clarity is specific to a discipline or set of disciplines working with a standardised technical vocabulary. Technical clarity has the obvious advantage of being able to abolish a dichotomy between clarity and complexity at least from an intra-disciplinary viewpoint. However, with the use of technical language, articles can become esoteric, only accessible for a narrow, specialised audience. Meanwhile, general clarity has the advantage of making the content accessible to a broader audience potentially opening a wider dialogue but risks ending up with a tension between clarity and complexity. General clarity must reduce complexity and risk accuracy in order to reach a broad audience.

With this inherent tension, the poetics of clarity begins to unfold as a multi-dimensional field of tension, rather than a harmonious space for textual production. It consists of an inherent tension between general and technical clarity, which can be understood in relation to the tension between the two uses of clarity discussed earlier, namely between clarity as 'the quality of being easily understood' and clarity as 'the quality of being expressed in a very exact way'. This is also a tension between the two textual relationships within the poetics of clarity (text–reader and text–world), which inherently involves the tension *clarity as/or readability*.

### *A textual economy of necessity*

Gazing back at the previous sections, at least one important ideal of academic writing has remained unthematized, namely *conciseness*. For example, the ideal of conciseness appears in relation to clarity in *The EMBO Journal* guidelines: 'manuscripts must be written in clear and concise English and be intelligible to a broad readership'. This example points to a possible kinship between clarity, readability, and conciseness. In this section, I will discuss how the principle of conciseness relates to a general ideal of a textual economy of necessity that might cut across the inherent tension: clarity as/or readability.

In contrast particularly to the ideal of simplicity, which was scarcely distributed in the guidelines, the ideal of conciseness is distributed widely. Furthermore, the ideal of conciseness is also present in more instances across the disciplines than the ideal of precision. Consider these examples:

- 1 Material in the review proper should be logically arranged and presented in a clear and concise style.

(*Chemical Reviews* guidelines)

- 2 The ideal *PMLA* essay exemplifies the best of its kind, whatever the kind; addresses a significant problem; draws out clearly the implications of its findings; and engages the attention of its audience through a concise, readable presentation.

(*PMLA* guidelines)



- 3 A clear and concise language will help editors and reviewers concentrate on the scientific content of your paper and thus smooth the peer review process.

(*Synthese* guidelines)

In the first example, conciseness is directly associated with clarity and ascribed to the style of communication. In the second example, conciseness is associated with readability. This connection with readability is emphasised further in the third example, where conciseness is specified as a way of expressing ideas, which helps the reader focus on the content. Altogether, the examples indicate that as a textual ideal conciseness relates to clarity in the sense of readability. This relationship between conciseness and clarity in the sense of readability is shared by every discipline analysed. Furthermore, the relationship between conciseness and readability brings the ideal of conciseness within proximity to simplicity. Here are some examples, which specify conciseness and underscore the proximity to the ideal of simplicity:

- 1 Be as concise as possible: do not say in ten words what could be said in four.

(*The Egyptian Journal of Neurology, Psychiatry and Neurosurgery* guidelines)

- 2 While *AJS* does not have any word-count limit, we encourage authors to be as concise as possible.

(*American Journal of Sociology* guidelines)

- 3 Write concisely (e.g. ‘even though’, not ‘in spite of the fact that’).

(*Science* guidelines)

These examples resemble the descriptions of simplicity discussed earlier, particularly concerning sentence length and text length. The first example specifically concerns the number of words needed to get to the point and subordinates word choice and sentence construction to an ideal of necessity (‘do not say in ten words what could be said in four’). The subordination of language use to an ideal of necessity and the importance of expressing only what needs to be communicated entails that conciseness can be associated with condensation. This ideal of necessity appears to be a variant of Ockham’s razor transformed into a textual ideal: rather than ‘entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity’,<sup>11</sup> ‘words should not be multiplied beyond necessity’. The second example stresses the importance of being concise in relation to the number of words used. Likewise, the third example shows how conciseness can be understood as *shortness* and directness, namely as the length of sentences. Thus, the examples indicate a conceptual overlap between simplicity and conciseness in the sense of directness or being *to the point*. Now appears an ideal of saying only what needs to be said or what I will call a *textual economy of necessity*.<sup>12</sup>

The textual economy of necessity concerns the effective transmission of ideas from writer to reader. It is based on a metaphor of language as a vessel of meaning.<sup>13</sup>



Thereby, a specific function of language is privileged, namely the need-oriented or *ideational* dimension through which language conveys messages.<sup>14</sup> The quality of ‘efficiency’ relates to the capability of a text to communicate its content directly, economically, and adequately. In the guidelines, this ideal of efficiency is distributed widely. Here are some further examples of the formulation of the textual economy of necessity:

- 1 The optimal length of a manuscript is the number of pages needed to effectively communicate the primary ideas of the study, review, or theoretical analysis. As a rule ‘less is more’. Discursive writing often obscures an author’s main points, and condensing long manuscripts often improves them. If a paper is too long, shorten it by stating points clearly and directly, confining the discussion to the specific problem under investigation, deleting or combining data displays, eliminating repetition across sections, and writing in the active voice.

*(Publication Manual of APA, 61)*

- 2 Effective scientific prose is precise, clear, economical, fluent, and graceful. These qualities depend on myriad details: the choice of words, the length and flow of individual sentences, how sentences relate to each other, and how paragraphs are linked.

*(Scientific Style and Format, 7.1)*<sup>15</sup>

- 3 Say only what needs to be said. The author who is frugal with words not only writes a more readable manuscript but also increases the chances that the manuscript will be accepted for publication. The number of printed pages a journal can publish is limited, and editors therefore often request that authors shorten submitted papers.

*(Publication Manual of APA, 67)*

In the examples, a strict economy of scientific wording is put forward and closely related to the basic principle that ‘less is more’. The efficiency of academic writing concerns the number of words and pages needed to communicate the primary content. In the first example, discursive writing (as in ‘rambling’) is seen as obscuring the main points and directness is recommended based on the principle that ‘less is more’, which means to communicate directly and clearly. In the second example, the importance of efficiency for scientific writing is accentuated by the central position it occupies. The examples present clarity as correlative with efficiency creating a chiasmic figure: clarity is efficiency; efficiency is clarity. So, textual economy becomes a matter of necessity and efficiency. Or as the third example explicates: ‘say only what needs to be said’. Furthermore, the third example links the ideal of efficiency to the economics of printing. Thereby, the textual economy of necessity can be understood in relation to the development of science, particularly the increased production of scientific papers.<sup>16</sup>

However, of particular interest now is the second example, which places an ideal of precision alongside textual economy as a means for efficiency.



This shows how the ideal of textual economy not merely concerns readability but also precision, and thus potentially cuts across the tension clarity as/or readability. Hence, it is important to notice that even though the ideal of textual economy can be connected with readability, it is not necessarily in opposition to the ideal of precision. Indeed, to be economical in a textual sense may entail using technical terms. On the one hand, the ideal of textual economy dictates that readability is secured through a striving for concision but, on the other hand, sometimes a long technical term may be more precise. So, a potential tension exists between two meanings of clarity, namely as readability or precision. Beneath this tension emerges a potential clash between readability and textual economy since technical terms may be a more efficient way to express a complex content.<sup>17</sup> Thereby, the ideal of textual economy potentially breaks off from the ideal of readability.<sup>18</sup> The following example below also unfolds this relationship between textual economy and precision:

Notations representing quantities, objects, and actions have been in use through all of recorded history (e.g. numerals for numbers of objects). As the pace of scientific discovery and description accelerated in the Renaissance period and in succeeding centuries, new notations were needed to efficiently represent the much more complex knowledge that was being developed. [. . .] Many symbolic notations in science have been developed in a logical and coherent scheme for specific functional needs. They may serve either to represent what cannot be as economically expressed by a term or to represent functional relations among various items, as in mathematical equations.

(*Scientific Style and Format*, 4.2)

This example establishes a relationship between the use and development of technical language and the pace of scientific discovery. For example, the journal *Physical Review* annually fills up more pages than all the articles produced in the seventeenth century.<sup>19</sup> The use of technical language, specifically, symbolic notations are linked to the ideal of textual economy. Consequently, the example supports the counter-description that brought the apparently harmonious relationship between readability and textual economy out of balance. Thus, so far, the poetics of clarity does not appear to form a harmonious unity, but rather a multi-dimensional field of tension consisting of a series of potential tensions and variations stretched out between (but not limited to) the principles of readability, textual economy, and precision. However, here it is important to note how the ideal of textual economy potentially cuts across the tension inherent in the poetics of clarity. In addition, because the ideal of textual economy is compatible with both readability and precision, it inscribes a common reign of efficiency within the poetics of clarity. This inscription of the poetics of clarity within a reign of efficiency marks another dimension of the ideal of textual economy, namely *velocity*.

*Velocity* concerns the speed of consumption of the content (the duration of reading). The speed of consumption can be related to the accessibility of the content as being readily available and freed from textual ornaments. The connection



between clarity as readability coupled with the ideal of textual economy entails a focus on the speed of consumption. Here are some descriptions of the textual economy of scientific writing as a way of ensuring a fast-paced consumption:

- 1 Unnecessary words and phrases slow the reader and should be eliminated. Some expressions, such as ‘it is interesting to note that’, add no information and can be omitted. Some constructions, such as the passive ‘It is reported by Smith’, can be converted to the active form (‘Smith reported’).

*(Scientific Style and Format, 7.7)*

- 2 Uniform style helps us to cull articles quickly for key points and findings. Rules of style in scientific writing encourage full disclosure of essential information and allow us to dispense with minor distractions. [...] Those elements are codified in the rules we follow for clear communication, allowing us to focus our intellectual energy on the substance of our research.

*(Publication Manual of APA, xiii)*

The above examples underscore the importance of a textual economy and describe the steps necessary to secure the rapidness of consumption. The first example explicates the importance of velocity as a reason behind the basic ideal of textual economy: ‘unnecessary words and phrases slow the reader’. Textual economy is directly coupled not only with the length of the text but also the duration of reading. While the first example opens another dimension, namely the velocity of consumption, the second example unfolds this dimension in more detail. The second example salutes standardised style as a way to ensure that key points and findings are directly accessible without distractions, letting readers focus their intellectual energy on the substance of the research.

A textual economy of necessity concerns the space and time of texts; the necessary space needed to elaborate the content adequately (the text–world relationship) and the minimal time needed to consume the content (the text–reader relationship). With the emphasis on velocity follows a preference for a rapid consumption that involves a reduction of words used to get to the main point. Texts are to be grasped quickly and easily rather than slowly and laboriously. Ideally, the consumption of a scientific text resembles seeing rather than reading: while reading takes time, seeing is direct, instant, immediate. The ideal of textual economy unfolds a dream of making the essential content directly visible. This ideal of a textual economy that secures the rapid mass consumption of content resonates with the third dictionary definition of clarity as ‘the quality of being easily seen’.

### ***Summary***

In this chapter, I have explored the concept of clarity at the idealised plane found in the guidelines. As I have shown, the ideal of clarity is distributed widely



across disciplinary borders and often used normatively to designate good writing. However, clarity is not a clearly defined concept, but rather in my comparative conceptual analysis it appeared as a fluid concept connected to different and at times conflicting concepts. This suggests that the poetics of clarity is not a harmonious unity, but a field of tension diffused between an ideal of general clarity and an ideal of technical clarity. While general clarity is related to an ideal of readability and the qualities of being *plain* or *simple*, technical clarity is related to precision and the qualities of *rigour* and *exactness*. The former privileges the text–reader relationship, the latter the text–world relationship. Meanwhile, the textual economy of necessity resides in an uncertain position; it can form a potential conflict with readability because the subordination of the text to a textual economy of necessity could decrease the ease of reading (although it could make it faster for the initiated reader). But it can also form a potential conflict with precision because being ‘economical’ is not necessarily compatible with capturing the complexity of the material. The textual economy of necessity can cut across the divide between readability and precision, but it cannot abolish the tension. Thus, the poetics of clarity is not a harmonious unity, but constitutes a conceptual field of tension.

## Notes

- 1 When I refer to the empirical material throughout my analysis, I have chosen to include a short reference in parenthesis after the quote to make the source directly visible for the reader. However, I have not included full bibliographical details in these parentheses but kept them as simple as possible. The full bibliography of the empirical material can be found in the ‘Works cited’ section under the heading ‘Empirical material’.
- 2 Joseph Gibaldi, *Modern Language Association (MLA) Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (New York, NY: The Modern Language Association of America, 2010), 49.
- 3 George R. Klare, ‘Readability’, in *Handbook of Reading Research*, ed. P. David Pearson, vol. 1984 (New York, NY: Longman, 1984), 681.
- 4 See also Joseph M. Williams, *Style. Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (New York, NY: Pearson Longman, 2006), 45.
- 5 *American Sociological Association Style Guide*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Sociological Association, 2010).
- 6 See also Klare, ‘Readability’, 681.
- 7 Merriam Webster dictionary online edition ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clarity](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clarity)), accessed 15 July 2015.
- 8 *Publication Manual of APA*, xiii.
- 9 See, e.g. the *MLA Handbook*, *Eastern European Countryside* guidelines, and *Eidos* guidelines for examples from literary studies, sociology and philosophy. Furthermore, Sword has also pointed out that the ideal of precision is widely disseminated across disciplinary borders (*Stylish Academic Writing*, 26).
- 10 ‘Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing, and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals’, 2014.
- 11 Cited from Julian Baggini and Peter S. Fosl, *The Philosopher’s Toolkit* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 105.
- 12 This ideal has been formulated numerous times throughout history for example by Socrates’ in the *Phaedrus* (Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 234e–235a); by Spencer in the *Philosophy*



- of Style (Herbert Spencer, *Philosophy of Style* (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1884), 11, 35); and by Grice in 'Logic and Conversation' (H.P. Grice, 'Logic and Conversation', in *Syntax and Semantics*, ed. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan, vol. 3 (New York, NY: Academic Press, 1975), 45–47).
- 13 See also George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 229.
  - 14 See Geoffrey N. Leech and Mick Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, 2nd ed., English Language Series (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), 109–110.
  - 15 *Scientific Style and Format. The Council of Science Editors Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers. Online Edition*, 8th ed. (The Council of Science Editors, 2014).
  - 16 Robert A. Day and Barbara Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9.
  - 17 Furthermore, as Spencer has pointed out, being economical may entail that language is used on several levels not only directly, but also indirectly to suggest something, thereby maximising the meaning of sentences (*Philosophy of Style*, 35). Nietzsche's aphoristic style could be an example of this kind of maximising. However, this shows how the principles of readability and textual economy can conflict.
  - 18 This potential tension between textual economy and readability runs parallel with Grice's maxims of *Manner* and *Quantity*, which in simplified form could look like this: 'Do not reduce where reduction leads to unclarity', but otherwise 'reduce as much as possible' (See Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 199. For a fuller sense of the maxims, see Grice, 'Logic and Conversation', 45–47).
  - 19 Alan G. Gross, Joseph E. Harmon, and Michael Reidy, *Communicating Science: The Scientific Article from the 17th Century to the Present* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 162.



## 2 The formation of sentences

Based on the rough sketch of the poetics of clarity that emerged in my analysis in the previous chapter, I will now focus on the formation of sentences. In this chapter, I will analyse three dimensions of sentence formation in academic writing: sentence construction (complexity, structure, and length), vocabulary (simple vs. technical), and poetic language use (especially focusing on metaphors). Rules, preferences, and recommendations concerning these dimensions of sentence construction are explicated in the guidelines. Here I will explore the textual embodiment of these ideals in academic writing. In the analysis, I move back-and-forth between poetic ideals and texts to search for textual patterns correlative to prescriptions in the guidelines. I begin by scrutinising sentence construction and the ideal of the direct declarative sentence. I show that across disciplinary borders sentences appear to form arrhythmic patterns of mainly declarative sentence types. Yet especially within the humanities and sociology, a larger variety of sentence types and structures appears. After analysing sentence structures and types, I turn to word choice and show that especially the humanities and sociology texts tend to use a common language, while the natural science texts employ a technical vocabulary. Finally, I turn to the use of poetic language and show that metaphors are generally omitted, which indicates a tacit ideal of the banishment of poetic devices.

### Sentence structures

I begin the exploration of the formation of sentences by analysing sentence construction focusing specifically on prevalent textual patterns in relation to poetic ideals of clarity. In the poetic ideals sketched out in the previous chapter, the preferred sentence structure was also touched upon in a few instances. For example, *Physical Review Letters* suggests that: ‘clear, simple sentence structure best presents scientific ideas’. Moreover, the *APA Publication Manual* specifies that ‘short sentences are easier to comprehend’. These prescriptions of short, simple sentence structures correlate specifically with the ideals of readability and the textual economy of necessity as well as a general demand for directness. This demand for directness also resonates with an earlier example from the *APA Publication Manual* which specifies that the best sentences are usually ‘direct, declarative sentences’.<sup>1</sup> The following examples also formulate the importance of directness:



- 1 We have words enough to praise writing we like: *clear, direct, concise*, and more than enough to abuse writing we don't: *unclear, indirect, abstract, dense, complex*.  
(Williams, *Style. Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 34)
- 2 Clarity in writing means using direct and straightforward language.  
(ASA Style Guide, 3)
- 3 Learn to appreciate, as most manuscript editors have learned to appreciate, the sheer beauty of the simple declarative sentence (subject, then verb, then object).  
(Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 186)

The first two examples illustrate the connection between clarity and directness. The first example places directness alongside *clear* and *concise* as praiseworthy features of writing. Likewise, the second example connects clarity to the use of direct language. Although the third example does not prescribe directness explicitly, when the preferred sentence structure is specified to follow a subject-verb-object (SVO) structure, this becomes a plead for directness as well. Interestingly, the third example even describes this sentence structure in terms of its 'sheer beauty'. Taken together with the examples from the *APA Publication Manual*, the contours of how clarity may be operative in sentence formation appear: sentences must ideally be direct, simple, and declarative.

Now I will explore the possible prevalence of any patterns of sentence formation that perhaps resemble or diverge from the ideal direct and simple declarative sentence. Below I have selected a passage from a research article example from *Nature*:

The transcriptional activation of the ID2 gene, a HIF $\alpha$  target, by HIF2 $\alpha$  generates a feed-forward ID2–HIF2 $\alpha$  loop that further supports cancer stem cells and glioma aggressiveness (Extended Data Figure 10). By showing that PHD1-mediated prolyl hydroxylation enhances the enzymatic activity of DYRK1 kinases towards ID2, our findings provide a clue to the mechanism of DYRK1 inhibition in hypoxia. Thus, inhibition of DYRK1 kinases is an oxygen-sensing signal that disables VCB–Cul2.

(*Nature* research article example, 176)

The sentences in this passage are all declarative, but they differ in terms of directness and complexity. The first two sentences are both complex not merely in terms of vocabulary, but also in terms of structure. Both sentences are relatively long with many words before the main verbs. In contrast, the third sentence resembles the ideal of the direct declarative sentence by being a short, simple sentence ('inhibition of DYRK1 kinases is an oxygen-sensing signal'). Thereby, the sentences embody a rhythmic variance in terms of complexity and structure. This example illustrates some characteristics of the texts from the natural sciences.



They are largely arrhythmic in terms of directness and complexity. Even though direct declarative sentences of the SVO form are present in the texts, they are not prevalent. While the sentences are mostly declarative, they differ in terms of directness and complexity.

If we turn to some examples from sociology and literary studies, similar arrhythmic sentence structures appear, but with important variations. Consider these passages:

- 1 Other studies center on African Americans' history and the correlation between enslavement and African descendants' names. Such analyses highlight how enslavers deployed nomenclature to cut Africans off from their former kin ties and ethnicities, as well as to assert control over their human property. They also pinpoint ways that Africans used designations from their earliest moments in the Western world to both assimilate into the dominant culture and created unique denominations that emphasized individuality and Africaneity. As they underwent these processes, they established new kinship bonds.

(*Souls* research article example, 70)

- 2 In the following paper, I would like to contribute to the recovery of the therapeutic dimension of the late Renaissance notion of imagination, by arguing that, when involved in the production of poetry, the imagination was thought to possess remedial and morally restorative capacities, it was believed to order the passions and submit them to the control of reason and thus provide mental, bodily and moral health for the speaker and listener alike.

(*University of Bucharest Review* research article example, 70)

The first example from *Souls* consists of relatively short sentences with the main verb appearing early. These sentences are characterised by their directness, and some sentences share a common structure resembling the ideal of a descriptive SVO sentence (e.g. 'other studies center on African Americans' history'). Yet, this passage is also characterised by arrhythmic variations between the sentences, particularly in terms of complexity. Thus, in line with the previous example from *Nature*, the sentence structures do not appear to constitute a specific pattern but differ in terms of directness and complexity. Meanwhile, the example from the *University of Bucharest Review* is different because it comprises an intricate and extensively long sentence with several clauses that decrease its readability through syntactic complexity. This complexity is visible at the end of the sentence which comprises a listing of beliefs about the imagination ('the imagination was thought to possess remedial and morally restorative capacities; it was believed to order the passions and submit them to the control of reason'). It even ends with a listing within the listing ('and thus provide mental, bodily and moral health for the speaker and listener alike'). Altogether, the level of detail entails that the sentence



structure decreases the readability. This example could indicate that literary studies comprise more complex sentence structures than the other disciplines and transgresses the ideals of directness and simplicity important for sentence formation within the poetics of clarity.

To explore sentence complexity further, I now shift my analytical approach to an explorative quantitative analysis of sentence lengths in the texts across the disciplines, because it can give a rough indication of sentence directness and simplicity. An influential measure of readability today is Flesch's formula of reading ease, which in its simplest form is based on two variables: word length and sentence length.<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, readability and the complexity of sentences cannot be reduced to a simple quantitative measure, yet as a complement to my analysis of sentence structure, the average number of words per sentence can give a rough sense of sentence complexity and expand the perspective.<sup>3</sup> With this proviso in mind, I will now compare the different disciplines in terms of average sentence lengths to explore whether the difference between the sentences analysed above in terms of complexity (and thus my assumed differentiation in terms of disciplinary differences) is also visible from this perspective.

While the average words per sentence in the literary studies texts is approximately 32, the average is lower in all the other disciplines: neuroscience (approx. 24 words), sociology (approx. 24 words), top journals (approx. 27 words), and philosophy (approx. 27 words). Except for the literary studies texts, these averages are all below the average sentence length of approximately 28 words in scientific texts written in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Averagely, the sentence length has decreased in scientific texts from approximately 32 words per sentence in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the literary studies texts appear to be closer to the average of the nineteenth century. However, it must be noted that while the average sentence in the literary studies texts is approximately 32 words per sentence, the example sentence I have been drawing on above is much longer and more complex (73 words). Therefore, the sentence from the *University of Bucharest Review* is extraordinary in comparison with other texts from the discipline. Yet, from an intra-textual perspective, the sentence is also extraordinary, because, in the text, the average sentence length is approximately 29 words per sentence, which indicates that the opening sentence of 73 words is an outlier, rather than the norm. What this also points to is that there can be tremendous rhythmic variations within a text in terms of complexity. But roughly, the differences in the average words per sentence does single out the literary studies texts as comprising longer and more complex sentences. Thereby a local disciplinary pattern of sentence formation appears: the sentences in literary studies are generally longer and have a more complex structure than sentences from the other disciplines.

Across disciplinary borders declarative sentence types are prevalent, yet their directness and complexity differ in ways that render it difficult to demarcate trans-disciplinary patterns of sentence formation. While no general trans-disciplinary patterns have appeared (except for the arrhythmic variations of declarative sentences), disciplinary differences have appeared that I now wish to delve into in more detail.



In contrast to the general arrhythmic heterogeneity of sentences across disciplinary borders, a remarkable rhythm appears in the methods sections of the natural science texts:

Electrophysiological data were recorded using Multiclamp 700A/700B amplifiers. Whole-cell data were low-pass filtered (10 kHz) and digitized at 100 kHz. Extracellular data were bandpass filtered (0,1–1 kHz) and digitized at 5 kHz. Data were captured using Clampex 10 software and digitally stored for off-line analysis.

(*The Journal of Neuroscience* research article example, 313)

This example presents a strange almost monotonous droning rhythm (e.g. ‘data were recorded’, ‘data were low-pass filtered’, etc.) only disrupted by specifications of what was done or used (e.g. ‘using Multiclamp 700A/700B amplifiers’). This monotonous rhythm of a passive voice specifying what was done (in the form ‘x was/were y’) is prevalent in the entire methods section of the example, only occasionally broken by surprising yet rare appearances of the personal pronoun ‘we’. This monotonous rhythm suggests a strict poetics governing the description of methodology. Here it must be noted, however, that within the other natural science text examples, the rhythm varies. Indeed, the explorative quantitative textual analysis shows that in comparison to the larger textual corpus of methods sections, ‘we’ is used less than average in the methods section in the *Journal of Neuroscience* article example.<sup>6</sup> This indicates that the text may be an outlier, but it does not entail that the droning rhythm does not appear in the other texts. Even in a text example such as the text from *Biological Psychiatry*, where the ‘we’ is used often in the methods section, the droning rhythm is also present. Thereby, the methods sections appear to be written in accordance with a standardised reporting system that follows a relatively simple syntactic structure of short sentences with the main verb early in the sentences. Yet precisely by using the passive construction, the sentences deviate from the general ideal of directness, because they break up the standard alignment of syntax positions and convolute comprehension.<sup>7</sup>

Given the standardised rhythm of the methods sections, the initiated reader (probably) knows precisely what to expect and can focus on the content without distractions. Yet for the uninitiated reader, the monotony of the sentences leaps to the eye, while the content remains virtually camouflaged by the droning rhythm. This rigid monotony characteristic of the methods sections in the natural science texts has no counterpart in the example texts from sociology and the humanities. For example, in the *Sociology* research article example the passive construction is present, but nowhere is the droning rhythm inaugurated. Rather, it is broken by straightforward formulations using personal pronouns. Thus, the monotonous droning rhythm indicating a standardised poetics is solely a pattern characteristic of the texts from the natural sciences.

Yet in literary studies and philosophy, it is possible to find other departures from the ideal of the direct declarative sentence structure. Interestingly, sentence



formation within these disciplines not merely conflicts with the ideal of directness but also departs from the prevalence of the declarative type. Consider this example:

Following this line of thought would lead to the suggestion that the significance of the inclusion problem is overstated. If the concept of *woman* is defined as a subordinated social category, then (the thought would go), it may be no bad thing to be excluded from that category.

(*Ethics* research article example, 402)

This example marks a difference between stating the actual and the possible. The verb ‘be’ is used to emphasise the possible (‘may be’). Furthermore, the example expresses a hypothetical situation (‘following this line of thought would lead to’), where a particular thought is tested. In the sentence, specifically, the conditional ‘if . . . then’ construction is used. In the explorative quantitative textual analysis, this conditional form appeared to be most frequently used in the philosophy texts, but it was also used in texts from literary studies and sociology. Meanwhile, it was completely absent from the neuroscience and top journal texts.<sup>8</sup> This difference suggests a schism between texts from especially philosophy, but also, on the one hand, literary studies and sociology, and, on the other hand, neuroscience and the top journals. Consequently, potential disciplinary differences of sentence types, complexity, and directness appears. Furthermore, it indicates a deviance from the ideal of direct declarative sentences. Indeed, the use of ‘if . . . then’ constructions can be seen as a way to draw distinctions and indicates a complex way of reasoning and writing.<sup>9</sup>

Here is an example from literary studies that further emphasises this deviance from the ideal by using not only the conditional sentence but also other sentence constructions that deviate from the declarative ideal:

Even if close readers do not – and relatively few close readers ever did – consult the single-page Basic sheet and formulate controlled-vocabulary paraphrases as a first step, Basic raises important theoretical questions about close and non-close reading: How would one even perform – or ever communicate to others – a close reading without something like Basic’s roster of simple, high-frequency words operating in one’s mind?

(*New Literary History* research article example, 497)

In this example, ‘if’ occurs in a formulation of a hypothetical situation, but instead of ‘if’ leading to ‘then’, it ends with a question. This is an example of a highly complex sentence not merely because of its length, but also because of the negative hypothetical formulation (‘Even if close readers do not’), the interposing comments, and the posing of a question. Here particularly the use of questions denotes important differences between the disciplines. From my explorative quantitative analytical perspective, questions tended to be much more frequent in the texts from literary studies and philosophy than in the other disciplines.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the text from *New Literary History* even ends with a question, rather



than a conclusion.<sup>11</sup> This runs parallel with Bazerman's example of a literary studies text that functions performatively and does not have a definite conclusion.<sup>12</sup> The text poses questions as a dynamic way to engage readers.

Moreover, the texts from philosophy and literary studies as well as sociology used interrogative formulations (marked by words such as 'how', 'what', 'why') more frequently than neuroscience and the top journals.<sup>13</sup> Parallel with the more frequent use of the interrogative sentence, philosophy and literary studies also deviate from the other disciplines by using (albeit rarely) exclamatory sentences.<sup>14</sup> Thereby, the contours of important disciplinary differences emerge. The use of questions, interrogatives, and exclamations indicates the existence of other types of sentences than the declarative. This suggests that the formation of sentences is not tied (at least as rigidly) to a specific ideal of the direct declarative sentence. Furthermore, the existence of multiple forms of sentences in particularly philosophy and literary studies indicates that the texts are not (merely) reporting findings, but actively shaping a problem and engaging the readers to participate in its further development. This also indicates disciplinary differences between stating the actual, the possible, and the normative. Philosophy, literary studies, and to some extent sociology deviate from the ideal of the direct declarative sentence by consisting of a greater variety of sentence types that constitute more complex sentences.

### *Word choice*

A central element in the formation of sentences is the choice of words. The choice of words is a matter that lies in the heart of the poetics of clarity and revolves around the tension between readability and precision. In many of the guidelines, there appears to be a tendency to formulate their audiences as broadly as possible. Thus, general clarity appears to be privileged at the idealised plane of poetics. Along with this privileging of readability follows specifications of word choice. For example, in the distinction between readability and precision also lies a difference between short common words and long technical terms. Now I will explore the research article examples and analyse word choice, especially pertaining to the distinction between a common and a technical vocabulary.

Yet, specifically the matter of word choice and privileging of readability or precision is relative to the (expected) readership, i.e. whether an intra-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, or non-specialised audience is addressed. Or as Williams formulates it: 'degrees of clarity are in the eye of more or less informed beholders'.<sup>15</sup> Thus, predicates such as 'common language' and 'technical vocabulary' is not without connection to the expected readers and their background knowledge. To begin with, I analyse word choice in relation to the background knowledge it presupposes – the *implied reader*. I borrow the concept of the *implied reader* from literary theory to designate a hypothetical reader who shares with the author the background knowledge as well as a set of predispositions and presuppositions important for understanding a text.<sup>16</sup> However, it must be noted that my analysis is necessarily tied to my position as a reader, and thus rests on my set of basic



presuppositions and tacit knowledge. This entails that, while I may resemble the implied reader inscribed in some of the texts, I am conversely far from that in other texts. Hence, my analysis cannot be detached from my basic predispositions, which entails that texts from the humanities and social sciences are more readable from my perspective.

To illustrate the question of word choice, I begin with examples of the first sentences in the texts, because the first sentences appear as inaugurate indications of the implied reader: it is (probably) the first sentence that readers encounter (after the abstract), and if the readers cannot understand the first sentence, will they continue? Here are some examples:

- 1 The HIF $\alpha$  (hypoxia-inducible factor alpha) transcription factors are the key mediators of the hypoxia response.  
(*Nature* research article example, 172)
- 2 Breadwinning models delineate the relationship between paid and unpaid labour in the family.  
(*Sociology* research article example, 109)
- 3 The expansion of international law and organizations is a remarkable development of world affairs in the past 60 years or so.  
(*Eidos* research article example, 38)

The differences in the examples are striking albeit not surprising. In the first example, the sentence from *Nature* consists of a complex technical use of nouns (such as ‘transcription factors’ and ‘hypoxia response’) that draws on a specialised scientific vocabulary, which must be known for the reader to make sense of the sentence. The other examples make use of nouns that are not necessarily simple (e.g. referring to concrete physical phenomena) but remain comprehensible to a broader audience (e.g. ‘family’ and ‘international law’).<sup>17</sup> However, some nouns used in these examples are complex and call for further specification to be accessible (e.g. ‘breadwinning models’). Furthermore, the choices of verbs also influence readability. Here the example from *Nature* solely consists of the verb ‘to be’, which makes it a simple descriptive statement of something, while this ‘something’ remains complex gibberish for a non-implied reader. Meanwhile, the use of the verb ‘delineate’ after ‘breadwinning models’ in the second example from *Sociology*, forms a complex statement even though it draws on a common register.

This difference between the use of technical and common language also finds support in my explorative quantitative analysis. The analysis of word frequencies indicates a tendency to use common words<sup>18</sup> more frequently within sociology, literary studies, and philosophy than in neuroscience and the top journals, where technical language use is frequent, particularly in high-impact journals such as *Nature*, *Science*, and *The Journal of Neuroscience*.<sup>19</sup> However, the frequency of common words varies in the top journals. For example, the text from *The Lancet*



remarkably uses common words as frequently as the articles from the humanities and sociology journals.<sup>20</sup>

Besides the use of common words, another indication of the complexity of word choice is the use of technical vocabulary. In line with the general prevalence of formulating an ideally broad expected audience, many guidelines advise against (over)using technical language. The differences in the use of a common language already give an indication of a more frequent use of technical vocabulary in the natural science texts. Now I explore the use of technical vocabulary further by focusing on some of the most technical formulations in the texts from a close reading perspective to discuss the dissemination of technical language use. Consider these examples:

- 1 Africans who were not enslaved, but who lived in a state of legal and social liminality that could easily lead to (re)enslavement, enacted a more formal process of onomastic opposition.  
(*Souls* research article example, 71)
- 2 Legally, the obligation to comply is institutionalized in the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* and in the ‘good faith’ clauses that appear in many international treaties, including in the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties.  
(*Eidos* research article example, 39)
- 3 In septic encephalopathy, the release of cytokines, procalcitonin, tumour necrosis factor  $\alpha$ , and interleukin 6 might lead to altered cerebral hemodynamics, disruption of the blood-brain barrier, cerebral edema, and disturbed neuronal function.  
(*Journal of Clinical Neurology* research article example, 98)

All the examples illustrate the use of a technical vocabulary. None of the research articles that have been analysed from the close reading perspective are completely exempt from using technical language. However, the concrete use of technical language varies. In the first two examples from sociology and philosophy, the technical language use pertains to concepts such as ‘liminality’, ‘onomastic opposition’, and ‘institutionalized’. These concepts are not part of the usual stock of everyday language but remain fairly close to what is understandable for a broad audience or can at least be looked up in a standard dictionary.<sup>21</sup> Yet the second example also illustrates a specialised use of a juridical vocabulary (‘*pacta sunt servanda*’), which delimits the readership further. The use of a specialised vocabulary can increase precision while simultaneously decreasing general readability by delimiting the implied reader to readers with the necessary prerequisite knowledge. Finally, in the third example from neuroscience, the vocabulary is specialised and complex (e.g. ‘the release of cytokines, procalcitonin, tumour necrosis factor  $\alpha$ , and interleukin 6’), thereby inscribing an implied reader with a highly specialised prerequisite knowledge. The examples indicate that the use



of technical language is widely distributed but varies in *technicality* ranging from concepts that can be looked up in a standard dictionary to an increasingly complex use of foreign words, formal notation, and technical terms. Generally, the natural science texts tended towards a larger complexity in terms of vocabulary.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, by being on average closer to an everyday vocabulary, the texts from the humanities and sociology do not demand the same technical background knowledge of their implied readers.

### ***Poetic language use: metaphors***

Poetic devices such as metaphors are rare visitors not only in the academic text but also in specifications of language use in the guidelines. Indeed, poetic devices are almost never mentioned in the guidelines (neither positively nor negatively) but remain left to poetic habits and tacit ideals. However, a few interesting exceptions from this silence exists:

- 1 Devices that attract attention to words, sounds, or other embellishments instead of to ideas are inappropriate in scientific writing. Avoid heavy alliteration, rhyming, poetic expressions, and clichés. Use metaphors sparingly; although they can simplify complicated ideas, metaphors can be distracting.

(*APA Publication Manual*, 70)

- 2 Literary devices, metaphors, and the like, divert attention from the substance to the style. They should be used rarely in scientific writing.

(Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 5)

In the first example, we find a crucial distinction between ideas and poetic language that privileges content. It specifically advises against using poetic expressions. The second example also distinguishes between content and poetic devices, but in this example, poetic devices are solely understood as distracting, because they divert attention away from the substance. Furthermore, both examples are based on a broader distinction between creative or entertaining writing and scientific writing.<sup>23</sup> As Day and Gastel write: ‘many kinds of writing are designed for entertainment. Scientific writing has a different purpose: to communicate scientific findings’.<sup>24</sup> As the examples show, the use of poetic language can potentially contradict the core ideals of clarity, namely readability, textual economy, and precision. In contrast to these ideals, a poetic device such as the metaphor risk rendering language less accessible, slowing the reader down and making the texts’ claims difficult to verify.

Yet the examples, express an ambivalence when they specify that metaphors should be used rarely, because while metaphors can distract, they may also enhance readability. Metaphors can be a way to say in common words, what would otherwise be mainly expressible in, e.g. technical terms. A metaphor is



a way to carry over meaning from one domain to another letting us understand one thing in terms of another.<sup>25</sup> Thus, poetic language such as metaphors may be a way to increase readability both in the sense of ease of understanding and in the sense of being interesting to read. However, in his guide to writing in the social sciences, Becker expresses a stronger belief in the importance of the use of metaphors, when he claims it to be a ‘serious theoretical exercise’.<sup>26</sup> According to Becker, metaphors must be alive to work – worn-out metaphors merely take up space.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, metaphors for Becker are more than mere pedagogical devices and his view on metaphors stands in stark contrast to the prescriptions above. This duality points at an inherent tension in the use of metaphors in knowledge production. As Aristotle already knew, they can familiarise the unfamiliar, but also risk rendering language enigmatic and opaque.<sup>28</sup>

Now if we turn to the research article examples, despite being relatively scarce, metaphors are used throughout the texts, but in quite divergent ways. Here are some examples:

- 1 Such an inquiry can be thought of as taking a ‘branching’ route starting with one set of goals but arriving at multiple target concepts.  
(*Ethics* research article example, 415)
- 2 According to Richards, the main innovation of Basic English was the high-redundancy 100 ‘operator’ words, Basic’s syntactical workhorses used over and over again (e.g. ‘put’, ‘give’) to replace a huge variety of English words – and all of these words were also high in Thorndike’s count, actually among the top thousand.  
(*New Literary History* research article example, 494).
- 3 ID proteins (ID1 to ID4) are master regulators of stem cells that are hijacked during tumorigenesis and foster stem cell self-renewal and angiogenesis.  
(*Nature* research article example, 172)

The first example plays on an image of the inquiry undertaken as ‘branching’ similar to a tree growing from a main axis developing several branches. It borrows from the domain of botany to describe how the inquiry developed. Furthermore, by describing the branching as a ‘route’, a familiar domain of travelling is brought into the image. Altogether, the example plays on familiar and easily understandable images of the tree of knowledge growing and knowledge as a journey. Meanwhile, the second example uses a relatively familiar image of ‘workhorses’ to describe the abstract domain of operator words. The metaphor of ‘workhorses’ draws on familiar associations such as hardworking and dependable that can be used ‘over and over again’ as the example specifies. Consequently, by juxtaposing language use with the domain of work, the metaphor ‘syntactical workhorses’ establishes a vivid image of how much work the operator words can carry out. Finally, the third example introduces an image of



a hijacking. Yet, this is no ordinary hijacking, but an unusual ‘hijacking’ of stem cells. By bringing together the cellular level and the criminal act of hijacking, the example creates a vivid, almost filmic image of a violent takeover during tumorigenesis. Moreover, the example also draws on a less unusual metaphor of proteins as ‘master regulators’ that creates an image of the cellular as a machinery with mechanisms of regulation. While the hijacking metaphor may appear novel compared to the well-established regulator metaphor, closer scrutiny, however, shows that ‘hijacking’ has become part of the standard description of how biological features are taken over.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the third example nicely depicts how metaphors can become standard descriptions and gradually lose their *metaphoricity*.

Altogether, the examples illustrate how the use of metaphors in academic writing ranges from conventional to novel use. However, the examples have been chosen to illustrate precisely this range, and thus, may misrepresent the distribution of the different kinds of metaphors. Indeed, the texts analysed from the close reading perspective are characterised by a rare use of mainly conventional metaphors. Thus, far from being alive as Becker demands, they appear largely as attempts to familiarise through conventional images and establish a text–reader relationship. Indeed, far from rendering language enigmatic, the rare use of poetic devices resonates with Day and Gastel’s demand of ‘absolute clarity in scientific writing’.<sup>30</sup> And a similar demand in *APA Publication Manual*, namely that it is important to ‘make certain that every word means exactly what you intend it to mean’.<sup>31</sup> The use of metaphors and other poetic devices is rarely specified in the guidelines, and they are generally strangers in research articles. This coincidence could indicate a tacit ideal of banishing poetic devices as an opposite to and potential enemy of clarity.<sup>32</sup>

### Summary

In this chapter, I have illustrated the textual variations and disciplinary differences within the heterogeneous field of tension I call the poetics of clarity. These variations and differences can be differentiated at the levels of sentence structure and word choice. First, the natural science texts comprise the simplest and most uniform sentence structures, while the texts from particularly literary studies and philosophy, but also to some extent sociology, comprise a higher degree of sentence complexity and larger variations of sentence types.<sup>33</sup> Especially, the variation of sentence types coupled with the degree of sentence complexity characteristic of the literary studies texts entail that these texts appear to transgress the poetics of clarity. This would be compatible with the general silence characteristic of the authorial guidelines from literary studies, which are very short and seldom specify language use in detail. Second, in terms of word choice, the tension between readability and precision was textually embodied in the difference between using common words and technical terms. Unsurprisingly, the disciplines differed between an extensive use of technical terms in the natural science texts and an extensive use of common words in the texts from sociology, philosophy, and literary studies. Indeed, as Gross, Harmon, and Reidy have shown,



in the twentieth century, scientific texts consist of shorter sentences and simpler syntactic structures than in earlier centuries, but they comprise an increased lexical complexity.<sup>34</sup> Yet across the disciplines, poetic devices such as metaphors were rarely used in the texts and mentioned in the guidelines. Consequently, the contours of a commonly shared yet tacit poetic ideal of banishing poetic devices appear in the poetics of clarity.

## Notes

- 1 *Publication Manual of APA*, 68.
- 2 Yohei Igarashi, 'Statistical Analysis at the Birth of Close Reading', *New Literary History* 46, no. 3 (2015): 485–504, 498.
- 3 See also Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 54.
- 4 See Gross, Harmon, and Reidy, *Communicating Science*, 171, and Charles Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 167–169.
- 5 Gross, Harmon, and Reidy, *Communicating Science*, 124, 171.
- 6 In the methods section, 'we' accounted for 0.07% of all words in the text from *The Journal of Neuroscience*. In comparison, in the methods sections, the 'we' averagely accounted for 0.37% of all words in the neuroscience texts and 0.78% of all words in the top journals. And in the text from *Biological Psychiatry*, 'we' accounted for 1.47% in the methods section.
- 7 See Anja Wanner, *Deconstructing the English Passive* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), 37, and Howard Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 79.
- 8 From my explorative quantitative approach (here based on *NVIVO*), the use of 'if' accounted for 0.27% of all words in philosophy, 0.20% of all words in literary studies, 0.15% of all words in sociology, and 0% in the top journals and neuroscience.
- 9 James W. Pennebaker, *The Secret Life of Pronouns* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 296.
- 10 In literary studies, the question mark accounted for 0.11% of all words (it is measured as a word in LIWC), and in philosophy it accounted for 0.14%. Meanwhile, in sociology it accounted for 0.6% and in neuroscience and in the top journals it accounted for 0.04%.
- 11 See *New Literary History*, example, 500.
- 12 Charles Bazerman, 'What Written Knowledge Does: Three Examples of Academic Discourse', in *The Sociology of the Sciences*, ed. Helga Nowotny and Klaus Taschwer, vol. 1 (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1981), 516.
- 13 The use of interrogative words accounted for 1.5% of all words in the texts from literary studies, 1.3% of all words in philosophy, and 1.2% of all words in sociology. In contrast, it only accounted for 0.63% of all words in the texts from both neuroscience and the top journals.
- 14 The exclamatory sentence was never used in either the texts from neuroscience, the top journals, or sociology. In contrast, the exclamation mark accounted for 0.005% of all words in literary studies and 0.02% of all words in philosophy: it was there but it was rare!
- 15 Williams, *Style. Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 45.
- 16 Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 208.
- 17 Here I borrow a distinction between concrete and abstract nouns from Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 61.
- 18 The frequency of common words described is based on an explorative quantitative analysis carried out in *LIWC* of the percentage of words captured by the program (*dictionary words*), which I take to be an indication of the use of common words. A limitation is that the frequencies described depend on the internal dictionary in *LIWC*.



- Thus, the frequencies described are the percentages of all words captured by the program (see Yla R. Tausczik, and James W. Pennebaker, 'The Psychological Meaning of Words: LIWC and Computerized Text Analysis Methods', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 29, no. 1 (2010): 24–54, 39). Across various language sources (such as blogs, novels, natural speech, and the New York Times) LIWC captures an average of 86% of all words used (James W. Pennebaker et al., 'The Development and Psychometric Properties of LIWC2015' (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2015)).
- 19 In the sociology texts, between 72 and 86% words per text were captured by LIWC; in the literary studies texts between 71 and 84% words were captured, and between 68 and 84% words were captured in the philosophy texts. In contrast, in the neuroscience texts between 56 and 74% words were captured, and in the texts from the top journals between 50 and 80% words were captured. However, particularly the texts from *Nature* (50%), *Science* (53%), and *The Journal of Neuroscience* (56%) stand out as examples of a very infrequent use of common words.
  - 20 In the text from *The Lancet* approximately 80% of all words were captured by LIWC.
  - 21 I have looked up the different terms in two independent dictionaries (*dictionary.com* and *oxforddictionaries.com*).
  - 22 This is not surprising and the gap between scientific and everyday language has also been pointed out by e.g. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning and Languages Live or Die* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 470.
  - 23 See *APA Publication Manual*, 65, and Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 4.
  - 24 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 4.
  - 25 See e.g. Aristotle, *The art of rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese, Reprint, The Loeb classical library 193 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1410b; Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), 366; Paul Simpson, *Stylistics* (London: Routledge, 2004), 41.
  - 26 Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists*, 86.
  - 27 Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists*, 86–87.
  - 28 This ambivalence is visible in the contrast between the *Rhetoric*, 1405b and the *Poetics*, 1458a (Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2006)).
  - 29 See e.g. Anna Lasorella, Robert Benezra, and Antonio Iavarone. 'The ID proteins: master regulators of cancer stem cells and tumour aggressiveness.' *Nature Reviews Cancer* 14, no. 2 (February 2014): 77–91.
  - 30 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 4.
  - 31 *Publication Manual of APA*, 68.
  - 32 Indeed, as Maasen and Weingart have also pointed out, metaphors and poetic devices are usually seen as improper language use in academic writing (Sabine Maasen and Peter Weingart, *Metaphors and the Dynamics of Knowledge* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 3).
  - 33 Parallel with this, Wanner also finds that there are larger linguistic variations in the humanities than in the natural sciences (see Wanner, *Deconstructing the English Passive*, 193).
  - 34 See Gross, Harmon, and Reidy, *Communicating Science*, 185–186.



### 3 Researchers-in-the-texts

In the previous chapter, a monotonous droning rhythm of passive voice appeared in the methods sections of the natural science texts. This rhythm marks a depersonalisation of the text. I explore this depersonalisation and more generally authorial positioning in this chapter by analysing two related dimensions of language use: voice and first-person pronouns. As I will show, there appears to be a discrepancy between an ideal of authorial presence and its textual effacement. This discrepancy is visible in the use of passive voice and in the sparse use of first-person pronouns in the texts. As I will show, the effacement of authorial presence reveals a *poetics of authorial effacement*, i.e. a way of writing that effaces the authors' agency textually. As I will show, the poetics of authorial effacement can be linked to an ideal of neutrality that constitutes an unstable authorial position of *disengaged engagement*. Thereby, the discrepancy not only constitutes a tension between the idealised plane of poetics and texts but also between different levels of poetic ideals.

#### Voice

Voice is an important dimension of language use in the poetics of clarity. Specifications of voice are visible in guidelines from sociology, neuroscience, and the top journals as well as in the general writing guides, and generally they advocate using the active voice.<sup>1</sup> For example, *Scientific Style and Format* describes the passive construction as conflicting with the ideal of textual economy.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the active voice can be seen as an incarnation of the ideal of textual economy, because it is believed to be more straightforward and direct.<sup>3</sup> Even though the passive construction has a long tradition in scientific writing, it appears to have run out of favour at least at the idealised plane of poetics.<sup>4</sup> Here are some additional specifications of the use of active and passive voice:

- 1 Manuscripts should be written in the active voice. Ideas should be expressed briefly, clearly, and concisely.  
(*Neuromodulation* guidelines)
- 2 Because the active voice is more precise and less wordy, use it whenever possible. The subject of an active sentence tells the reader who did



something, and the active verb says what happened. A passive sentence tells the reader what happened but attributes the action to no one.

(*ASA Style Guide*, 6)

- 3 What matters more than the grammatical distinction between active and passive is the simple act of putting crucial actions into verbs and making some important character in the story you are telling the subject of the verb. But paying attention to the grammatical distinction starts you on the right road. Active verbs almost always force you to name the person who did whatever was done (although gifted obfuscators can avoid the requirement). We seldom think that things just happen all by themselves as passive verbs suggest because in our daily lives people do things and make them happen. Sentences that name active agents make our representations of social life more understandable and believable.

(Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists*, 79)

These examples all express a preference for the active voice because it is seen as more precise, economical, and readable. Indeed, the active voice appears to be a possible textual embodiment of the three dissimilar ideals (readability, precision, textual economy). Yet the prescriptions of the active voice differ in degrees of rigidity. The first example is the strictest dismissal of the passive voice ('should be'). Meanwhile, the second example also dismisses the passive voice, but in a less rigid fashion: use the active voice 'whenever possible'. The second example directly connects the active voice to two central principles in the poetics of clarity, namely precision and textual economy. In the third example, the active voice is merely seen as a means to ensure that crucial actions are put into verbs and that the main character of the story is the subject. Thus, in this example, the use of active voice is not a goal in itself, but a means to achieve a more understandable and believable text. While the preference for the active voice is generally based on a connection with the ideals of readability, precision, and textual economy, the preference is expressed with drastically varying degrees of rigidity.

The neuroscience guidelines express the most rigid prescriptions of the active voice.<sup>5</sup> Given these rigid specifications, the extensive use of the passive voice in the rhythmic droning sentences of the methods sections may appear surprising. Indeed, this could bring any supposed correlation or at least convergence between the poetic ideals formulated in the guidelines and the texts into question – maybe no textual embodiments of the poetic ideals exist, but rather a different sphere of poetics in the texts that opposes and perhaps negates the explicit principles of the guidelines? Yet, in the guidelines from the natural sciences, specific prescriptions assign the proper textual place for the passive voice to the methods section:

- 1 The active voice is preferred because the sentence structure is more direct and the meaning of the sentence is easier for the reader to understand. The passive voice is best used when the emphasis is on a process



taking place (as in the materials and methods section of a report) rather than on who is performing the action.

(*Scientific Style and Format*, 7.9)

## 2 Say it simply: tips for clear writing

Overuse of the passive voice is a common problem in writing. Although the passive has its place – for example, in the Methods section – in many instances it makes the manuscript dull by failing to identify the author's role in the research.

(*The Journal of Neuroscience* guidelines)

The first example from *Scientific Style and Format* reiterates some of the reasons for preferring the active voice, namely its relationship with directness as well as readability. However, in contrast to the previous examples, it assigns the properness of the passive voice to a specific section, namely the methods section. The second example also places the passive voice within the proper boundaries of the methods section. In the second example, the use of the active voice is placed under the general headline of textual economy ('say it simply'), and the use of the passive voice is described as a common problem, except in the methods section. Thereby, a legitimate textual space for the passive voice is demarcated. Indeed, it appears to be acceptable to suspend the active voice in the methods sections even though the active voice is seen as a textual incarnation of the core ideals (readability, precision, and textual economy).

The demarcation of sections with different proper voices hints at a set of general presuppositions concerning the process of scientific production that goes beyond rules for scientific writing. When the passive voice is arrested within the boundaries of the methods section in the natural science guidelines something appears to be at stake. The stakes are explicated in the example from *The Journal of Neuroscience*, where the passive voice is described as a weak practice because it fails to identify the author's role in the research. This example indicates that the governing of voice concerns more than matters of textual economy, precision, and readability. Indeed, voice appears to be directly related to the positioning of the author(s) both in the text and in scientific practice. This dimension of voice is underscored in several guidelines that distinguish the active sentence stating who did something and the passive sentence that attributes an action to no one.<sup>6</sup> Thus, when the passive voice is arrested within the textual boundaries demarcating the methods sections, it appears to be presupposed that methods can be seen as independent from an active subject or at least it is not important to identify the actor explicitly. Hence, voice is related to authorial viewpoint and the relationship between the researcher and the object of research, and the passive voice can be (mis)used to conceal agency and perhaps constitute a false appearance of objectivity.

Whereas the natural science guidelines attempt to arrest the passive voice within specific textual boundaries (particularly the methods section), sociology



is torn between accepting or rejecting the passive voice. Indeed, within a single manual of style, it is possible to find a tension between delimiting the passive voice and accepting it:

- 1 Verbs are vigorous, direct communicators. Use the active rather than the passive voice, and select tense or mood carefully.  
(*Publication Manual of APA*, 77)
- 2 The passive voice is acceptable in expository writing and when you want to focus on the object or recipient of the action rather than on the actor.  
(*Publication Manual of APA*, 77)

The two examples are both from the same page of the *APA Publication Manual*, yet apparently they express diverging views on the use of passive voice. In the first example, the active voice is preferred over the passive voice. Yet, the second example declares the passive voice acceptable in expository writing. Even though the *APA Publication Manual* subscribes to the widespread juxtaposition of the active voice and the ideal of textual economy, it also declares the passive voice acceptable.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, this acceptance of the passive voice conflicts with another important manual of style in sociology, namely the *ASA Style Guide*, which recommends that writers use the active voice ‘whenever possible’. Thus, within sociology appears a fundamental indeterminacy. A similar indeterminacy, however, less explicit can be found in the humanities. Here are a few examples:

- 1 As a matter of style, passive voice {the matter will be given careful consideration} is typically, though not always, inferior to active voice {we will consider the matter carefully}. The choice between active and passive voice may depend on which point of view is desired.  
(*The Chicago Manual of Style*, 5.115)<sup>8</sup>
- 2 Some critics of style tell us to avoid the passive everywhere because it adds a couple of words and often deletes the agent, the ‘doer’ of the action. But in fact, the passive is often the better choice.  
(Williams, *Style. Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 61)
- 3 The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive.  
(Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, 18)

Within the humanities guidelines, voice is seldom specified except in manuals of style and writing guides. The first example reinstates the belief that the passive voice is inferior to the active voice, yet it also specifies that choice of voice must reflect the desired point of view. There may be occasions where the passive voice is preferable, but the properness of the passive voice is not arrested within particular textual boundaries. The second example further underscores the possibility of using the passive voice stating that ‘the passive is often the



better choice'. Hence, the passive voice appears to be acceptable within the humanities. However, the third example privileges the active voice and establish a hierarchy similar to what we have seen so far in the natural sciences. Day and Gastel also express this view when they explain that 'the active voice is usually more precise and less wordy than is the passive voice'.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the contours of a tension between accepting and rejecting the passive voice similar to the tension in sociology appears within the humanities.

To get closer to the status of the passive voice, I will now turn to the research articles. As I have already exemplified, the methods sections in the texts analysed from the natural sciences comprised an extensive use of passive voice that constituted a droning rhythm. The monotonous droning rhythm specifically constitutes a depersonalised text in which the real actors (the researchers) are hidden, and their actions follow a monotonous rhythm of necessity resembling a machine, rather than a human being.<sup>10</sup> Or as de Bonald has shown, with the wake of the mechanical sciences, scientists begin to resemble machines.<sup>11</sup> However, this mechanic droning rhythm characteristic of the methods sections corresponds well with the prescriptions for proper use of voice in the guidelines and marks a rigid poetics. However, this rigid poetics specifically pertains to the methods section in the natural science texts. In contrast, the methods sections of the research article examples from sociology do not constitute a similar rhythm. Rather, they illustrate the existence without prevalence of the passive voice in academic journal writing across disciplinary borders. The passive voice is visible throughout the sample texts, but the use of passive voice in general appears to be momentary and does not constitute a monotonous droning rhythm. Consider these examples:

- 1 We detected significant main effects of dorsoventral position on AP peak and threshold, whereas AP width and maximum rate of rise were independent of location. Nevertheless, no significant effect of genotype was observed for any of these AP properties.

(*The Journal of Neuroscience* research  
article example, 315)

- 2 The importance of the international rule of law is routinely affirmed by governments, international organizations, scholars, and activists. It is variously credited with, among other things, reducing the recourse to war, preserving human rights, and constraining (albeit imperfectly) the pursuit of state self-interests. It is commonly seen as supplanting coercion and power politics with a framework of mutual interests that is cemented by state consent.

(*Eidos* research article example, 38)

These passages illustrate a variance of voice. The first example from *The Journal of Neuroscience* illustrates a mixture of active and passive voice: the researchers are actively present ('We detected') followed by a passive construction ('was observed'). This fluctuation of voice constitutes a variance of explicit authorial



presence in the text. Meanwhile, in the second passage from *Eidos*, the passive voice is used extensively (e.g. ‘is routinely affirmed’, ‘is variously credited’), and appears to form a momentary rhythm (‘it is’). However, it must be noted that the passive constructions in this example varies between the short passive stripped from explicit reference to the agent and passive constructions using ‘by’ to explicate the agent (e.g. in ‘is routinely affirmed by governments’). Interestingly, rather than effacing the agent of the action, passive constructions including a specification of the agent in the end (marked by ‘by’) can emphasise the agent.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the passive voice does not necessarily entail an effacement of agency in an attempt to constitute an appearance of objectivity. Because of the multi-component nature of the passive construction, it does not have a single function; it can place the agents in the background, but it can also emphasise the agent.<sup>13</sup> Yet, in scientific writing, most passive constructions occur without a ‘by phrase’, which entails that generally the agent is effaced.<sup>14</sup>

In general, academic writing is characterised by an extensive use of the passive construction.<sup>15</sup> However, at the prescriptive level of poetic ideals, the rigidity of regulation as well as the status of the passive construction differs widely. The prescriptive level ranges from a rigid poetics arresting the passive voice within specific textual boundaries in the natural sciences, to a tension in sociology and the humanities. These variations appear to be textually embodied to some degree. Yet, alternate movements of effacement in academic writing also exist. For example, the active voice does not necessarily entail authorial presence, because it can comprise non-human agents in the subject position (e.g. ‘these data show’).<sup>16</sup> According to Gross, Harmon, and Reidy, in the twentieth century there has been a tendency to substitute human agency with non-human agency in scientific prose.<sup>17</sup> Altogether, the use of the short passive construction in conjunction with active constructions with non-human agents in academic writing largely entails the disappearance of the author(s), thus leading to a poetics of authorial effacement.

### *First-person pronouns*

So far, I have explored voice. Now I will explore a related dimension, namely the status and use of first-person pronouns. While the use of voice is explicitly governed in the guidelines, first-person pronouns is seldom specified. Here are a few exceptions:

- 1 Why, then, do scientists use so much passive voice? Perhaps this bad habit results from the erroneous idea that it is somehow impolite to use first-person pronouns. Because of this idea, the scientist commonly uses verbose (and imprecise) statements such as ‘It was found that’ in preference to the short, unambiguous ‘I found’. [. . .] Young scientists should renounce the false modesty of their predecessors. Do not be afraid to name the agent of the action in a sentence, even when it is ‘I’ or ‘we’.

(Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 193–194)



- 2 Some writers and editors avoid the first-person by using the passive everywhere, but deleting an *I* or *we* doesn't make a researcher's thinking more objective. We know that behind those impersonal sentences are still flesh-and-blood people doing, thinking, and writing.

(Williams, *Style. Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 67)

The examples express a general preference for the use of personal pronouns and connect first-person pronouns to the problem of voice. The first example claims the use of first-person pronouns is more direct and precise. This argument leads to an appeal to young scientists to use first-person pronouns. The second example suggests that the passive voice can hide the subject to make the thinking appear more objective. While there appears to be a tendency to link first-person pronouns to the active voice and general ideals of precision and textual economy, in sociology a tension concerning first-person pronouns appears:

- 1 The *ASA Style Guide* emphasizes formal, objective, orderly, and grammatically sound expression. For example, writers should generally avoid writing in the first-person, injecting opinion, overstating claims, and overwriting. They should use the active voice, maintain consistency in grammatical constructions, be concrete and specific, aim for creative but smooth composition, and follow standard usages and conventions.

(*ASA Style Guide*, 2)

- 2 Inappropriately or illogically attributing action in an effort to be objective can be misleading. Examples of undesirable attribution include use of the third person, anthropomorphism, and use of the editorial *we*. [. . .] For clarity, restrict your use of *we* to refer only to yourself and your coauthors (use *I* if you are the sole author of the paper).

(*Publication Manual of APA*, 69)

In the first example, in defence of objective and orderly expression, the use of the first-person is discouraged without any differentiation between singular and plural. In contrast, the second example recommends using first-person pronouns, rather than the third person. The attributions of the third person or an *editorial we* are seen as a possibly misleading effort to appear objective. Thereby a tension appears between two closely related manuals of style, which function as writing guides in sociology and related disciplines. This tension suggests that the use of first-person pronouns is contested in sociology. The tension between the *ASA Style Guide* and the *APA Publication Manual* runs parallel with the tension concerning voice. Parallel with the choice of voice, as the example from *APA Publication Manual* explicates, first-person pronouns is believed to concern more than a mere choice of words, viz. an appearance of objectivity. However, most guidelines that specify the use of first-person pronouns recommend using them, rather than avoiding them.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to the recommendations in the guidelines, the explorative quantitative textual analysis shows that the first-person pronoun is an infrequent visitor



to the academic text. This might indicate that even though the use of first-person pronouns is almost never restricted at the level of a general poetics but encouraged, an inherent poetic habit or inclination to efface personal traits exists. This poetic inclination appears to exist across disciplinary borders. Indeed, the degrees of authorial presence (or absence) marked by the use of first-person pronouns do not separate the disciplines. On the contrary, first-person pronouns appear but rarely in every text analysed.<sup>19</sup> And first-person pronouns are used with almost the same frequency in sociology, the top journals, and neuroscience.<sup>20</sup> However, as I will show, beneath these apparent similarities lies a marked difference in the use of first-person pronouns. Let us explore this by first considering the following examples:

- 1 I demonstrate that for New Afrikans name selection comprised one of the most basic exhibitions of self-determination and empowerment enacted in the quotidian aspects of activists' lives.

(*Souls* research article example, 69)

- 2 We show that ID2 activity is restrained by DYRK1 kinase-mediated phosphorylation on Thr27 and hypoxia reduces this event by inhibiting DYRK1 activity.

(*Nature* research article example, 172)

These two examples from *Souls* and *Nature* both use the first-person pronoun in the singular and plural, respectively. Yet, in these examples, the first-person pronoun is used strictly to refer to the author(s), i.e. they function as an authorial reference. Here the difference between the use of 'I' and 'we' is merely a difference between the number of authors. Averagely, there are more authors in the natural science texts than in texts from sociology, literary studies, and philosophy, where texts are largely single-authored. Thus, it is no surprise that 'I' is never used in the natural science texts, and this does not say anything about authorial absence and the appearance of objectivity. What is interesting, however, is that in the natural science texts, 'we' is used in a restricted sense, namely as an *authorial we* rather than an *editorial we*.

While 'we' is largely used as an authorial we in the natural science texts, particularly literary studies mark an interesting difference. Quite surprisingly, even though most of the texts from literary studies were single-authored (nine of ten), there was a tendency to use 'we' considerably more extensively than 'I'.<sup>21</sup> This indicates a broader use of 'we' than the *authorial we*. Meanwhile, in the texts from philosophy and sociology there was a tendency to use 'I' much more frequently than in literary studies; but in the single-authored texts from these disciplines, non-restricted forms of 'we' was also used.<sup>22</sup> Here are some examples from single-authored texts using 'we' in broader ways:

- 1 Since, as we shall see, this notion surfaces and draws on the same repertoire of philosophical traditions trans-nationally, I have chosen to discuss both the English and French components in the debate.

(*University of Bucharest Review* research article example, 70)



- 2 How might we, at present, avoid replicating the New Criticism's failure to incorporate reading research at the very moment when its concerns overlapped most with those of reading research?  
(*New Literary History* research article example, 500)

- 3 Since our overall experience of gender is a product of the interaction of dominant systems of meaning and our own subjective experiences, gender as we live it is a function of both gender as class and gender as identity.  
(*Ethics* research article example, 410–411)

In the first example, 'we' is used to establish an author–reader relationship – an *author–reader we* that unites the gaze of the authors and readers.<sup>23</sup> In this way, the reader is drawn into the text and called upon to participate in the line of argument (marked by 'as we shall see'). Thereby the readers are taking part in following the reasoning and checking the conclusions with their own eyes. This leads to an extended 'we' that objectifies the reasoning. This example is particularly interesting because it consists of a mixture of first-person pronouns in both singular and plural. The mixing of singular and plural forms of first-person pronouns in single-authored texts is common, in particular, in literary studies and philosophy. While the 'I' is unequivocally referring to the author, the 'we' extends beyond the author's subjectivity. In the second example, the 'we' refers to contemporary scholars and the author in an attempt to establish a shared obstacle. Meanwhile, in the third example, the 'we' extends further into abstraction by referring to human beings: 'gender as we live it'. In this example, the author describes how our overall experience of gender is formed. This extended use of 'we' reaches far beyond the author's subjectivity. Altogether, the examples here show how 'we' is used to mark group belongings ranging from small concrete groups with personal relations to abstract groups. The extended uses of 'we' allow authors to inscribe themselves in specific groups and remove them from the naked subjectivity of the 'I'. With the gradual abstraction and extension of the use of 'we', a *We of Humanity* is reached in which the subjectivity of the author seems to disappear into the objectivity of the masses.

What appeared in the quantitative textual analysis to be an almost similar degree of authorial presence across disciplinary borders must be differentiated. While the texts from philosophy use first-person pronouns more extensively if the *authorial I* is distinguished from the extended uses of 'we', the direct references to the author are no more frequent than in the other disciplines. Meanwhile, specifically the texts from literary studies consist of a frequent use of an unrestricted 'we', while the *authorial I* is barely visible. Rather than constituting an appearance of objectivity by removing authorial references and effacing the visibility of agency, the use of a non-restricted and extensively abstracted 'we', specifically in literary studies and philosophy, constitutes an appearance of objectivity. Thus, the effacement of authorial presence in the name of objectivity is more pronounced in the humanities texts, but perhaps paradoxically with the use of the first-person pronoun 'we'. In addition, the different degrees of abstractions challenge the clarity of who speaks.



In general, the disciplines use first-person pronouns less than in ordinary language use.<sup>24</sup> So the texts do not appear to follow the prescriptions to use first-person pronouns as well as the general emphasis on the importance of making the acting subject visible. This may be a consequence of the relatively rare specifications of the use of first-person pronouns in the guidelines, as well as the presence of existing views advocating an opposite usage for them.<sup>25</sup> Altogether, the widespread use of the passive construction and the active construction with non-human agents, coupled with the minimal use of first-person pronouns could indicate a poetics running counter to the explicit ideal of making the researcher visible, namely a trans-disciplinary poetics of authorial effacement.

### *A poetics of authorial effacement*

Generally, researchers are suggested to make themselves visible in the texts. This call for authorial presence is (at times) grounded with reference to one or more of the core poetic ideals of readability, precision, and/or textual economy. Yet there appears to be a poetics of authorial effacement running counter to the poetic ideal of making the author(s) visible.

This poetics of effacement may be grounded in the inscription of the position of the author within a system of specific values and ideals. Here I will explore these values and ideals, and attempt to show how scientific authors are situated in an unstable textual position demanding *disengaged engagement*. Let me begin with an example:

*Place yourself in the background.* Write to draw attention to sense and substance not mood and temper. If writing is solid and good, the mood and temper of the writer will eventually be revealed and not at the expense of the work. Therefore, the first piece of advice is this: to achieve style, begin by affecting none – that is, place yourself in the background. A careful and honest writer does not need to worry about style.

(Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, 70)

In this example, the demand to ‘place yourself in the background’ appears to run counter with the general ideal of making the active subject visible. However, here the opposite of being in the background is not merely to explicate the active subject performing an action, but a subject whose mood and temper may interfere with and draw attention away from the substance of the research. Thus, the imperative ‘place yourself in the background’ does not necessarily conflict with the general ideals of authorial presence. Nevertheless, the example illustrates the cardinal virtue of neutrality as a self-controlled presentation of the research without letting either the presentation or the content be imbued with subjective preferences or bias.

The inscription of the virtue of neutrality in the authorial position is also visible in these examples:

- 1 Public trust in the scientific process and the credibility of published articles depend in part on how transparently conflicts of interest are handled



during the planning, implementation, writing, peer review, editing, and publication of scientific work.

*(International Committee of Medical Journal  
Editors Recommendations, 3)*

- 2 Presented data must represent the findings in an unbiased, accurate and transparent manner.

*(The EMBO Journal guidelines)*

- 3 In all scientific disciplines, professional communications are presumed to be based on objective interpretations of evidence and unbiased interpretation of fact. An author's economic and commercial interests in products or services used or discussed in a paper may color such objectivity.

*(Publication Manual of APA, 17)*

The examples above illustrate the demand for neutrality related to transparency. The first example concerns the declaration of potential conflicts of interest. In the example, *transparency* primarily concerns making potential bias and conflicts of interest (e.g. financial) visible. Meanwhile, the second and third examples concern the interpretation of data and presentation of research. In these examples, transparency concerns the representation of data in an accurate and unbiased, objective manner. This idea of transparency could be seen as a foundation for objectivity in research. Thereby, the psychological constitution of the scientific author is specified, and a dividing line is drawn between the preferred objectivity and neutrality of researchers and interests, colouring, and passions.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, while a widespread demand of the scientific author to be neutral exists, in a few instances the psychological constitution of the scientific author is described differently. Even though the examples below are marginal (and only present in the humanities guidelines), they provide an interesting contrast to the standard description of the attributes of the scientific author:

- 1 It [The Editorial Office] welcomes preferably papers written in English and Spanish but also accepts manuscripts in French, Italian and Portuguese in order to promote an enthusiastic worldwide dialogue on the pluralistic philosophical attitudes to all areas of interest in humanities.

*(Eidos guidelines)*

- 2 Even though you are just learning how to prepare a research paper, you may still experience some of the excitement of developing and testing ideas that is one of the great satisfactions of research and scholarship.

*(MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 5)*

In the first example, the virtue of 'enthusiasm' is brought into the scientific field of knowledge production in the formulation that the journal accepts papers in many languages 'in order to promote an enthusiastic worldwide dialogue'. Meanwhile, the



second example emphasises the excitement and satisfaction of doing research and accentuates a general passion for research. The passion of the researcher in the search for knowledge is expressed as an eagerness or devotion to the subject. Thereby the examples pronounce a legitimate kind of interest, namely a genuine albeit passionate interest in the content. The entrance of passions such as enthusiasm and excitement could mark a contrast to the demand for neutrality and objectivity where personal interests must be left aside. Yet, this apparent dichotomy between neutrality and passion does not entail that neutrality and passion are necessarily in conflict. Rather, passionate and enthusiastic research can also strive for neutrality and transparency. Indeed, where would science be without both?

Even though the two ideal psychological dimensions of the scientific author are not necessarily in conflict, this does not entail that the passionate researcher must be (and is acceptable as) the researcher-in-the-text. Rather, passionate researchers must control their mood and temper to let the content present itself in a neutral and objective fashion. Consequently, the authorial position unfolds as a paradoxical disengaged engagement: the researchers-in-the-texts must be absently present. Perhaps because of this paradox, the researchers are often effaced and absent in the texts.

### Summary

In this chapter, I have explored authorial positioning. At the idealised plane of poetics, there is a tendency to prescribe the visibility of the author. Yet, across disciplinary borders, the texts do not follow this ideal; rather they embody a conflicting poetics of authorial effacement, which, however, finds support in specific poetic prescriptions and lacunae. Consequently, the idealised plane of poetics collides with a trans-disciplinary poetics of authorial effacement. Perhaps this conflict can be seen as an indication of the ideals of scientific language beginning to change: once linguistic expression of agency was conventionally minimised and the passive construction was the usual way to write, but now these ideals may have run out of favour.<sup>27</sup> However, the tension can also be understood in relation to the inscription of the cardinal virtue of neutrality in the authorial position. In spite of a general ideal of explicating the acting subject through active constructions and first-person pronouns, the ideal of neutrality can easily lead to authorial absence, dispassionate detachment, and a poetics of authorial effacement. Interestingly, this also differentiates the poetics of clarity as a field of tension and shows how certain poetic lacunae may exist.

### Notes

- 1 This is in line with Sword's analysis of writing guides, where the majority encourage the use of active verbs (*Stylish Academic Writing*, 26).
- 2 *Scientific Style and Format*, 7.7.
- 3 See e.g. *Publication Manual of APA*, 61, 67.
- 4 See Wanner, *Deconstructing the English Passive*, 160.
- 5 See *The Journal of Neuroscience* and *The Egyptian Journal of Neurology, Psychiatry and Neurosurgery* guidelines.



- 6 See *ASA Style Guide*, 6; *Publication Manual of APA*, 77; *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 5.115; and *Scientific Style and Format*, 7.9.
- 7 See *Publication Manual of APA*, 61, 67.
- 8 *The Chicago Manual of Style. Online Edition*, 16th ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
- 9 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 193.
- 10 As Knorr-Cetina has already pointed out, methods sections do not have a dynamic structure and the scientific paper is an exercise in depersonalisation (Karin D. Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981), 115).
- 11 See Wolf Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 10.
- 12 See Wanner, *Deconstructing the English Passive*, 47.
- 13 Wanner, *Deconstructing the English Passive*, 47.
- 14 Wanner, *Deconstructing the English Passive*, 110.
- 15 See e.g. Wanner, *Deconstructing the English Passive*, 167–168; Gross, Harmon, and Reidy, *Communicating Science*, 186.
- 16 For a more detailed discussion see Wanner, *Deconstructing the English Passive*, 192–194.
- 17 Gross, Harmon, and Reidy, *Communicating Science*, 166.
- 18 While I have only found a few examples of guidelines prescribing or restricting the use of first-person pronouns, Sword's more extensive analysis supports the tendency I find, namely that a majority of guidelines advocate the use of personal pronouns, while a few explicitly caution against them (*Stylish Academic Writing*, 28).
- 19 This runs parallel with Sword's analysis, which shows that personal pronouns are used in most articles (in her textual corpus) (see *Stylish Academic Writing*, 17). However, the use of personal pronouns concerns more than the mere appearance of them; it concerns how frequently they occur and how they are used.
- 20 In the texts from philosophy, the use of first-person pronouns (regardless of singular or plural) accounted for 1.1% of all words, which was higher than in literary studies (0.82%), sociology (0.67%), the top journals (0.69%), and neuroscience (0.6%).
- 21 In the single-authored literary studies texts, the 'I' only accounted for 0.16% of all words, while the 'we' accounted for 0.64%.
- 22 In the single-authored philosophy texts, the 'I' accounted for 0.72% of all words; in sociology, it accounted for 0.55%. Meanwhile, the 'we' was also used in single-authored texts from philosophy, where it accounted for 0.44% and in sociology, where it accounted for 0.1%.
- 23 Sometimes, the *author-reader we* is designated as the *inclusive we* (see e.g. Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 36). However, I have chosen to designate it as the *author-reader we*, because as I will show, there are several degrees of the *inclusive we* depending on the degree of extension and abstraction.
- 24 From a historical point of view, the use of personal pronouns in scientific writing in the twentieth-century has decreased in comparison with earlier centuries, and focus has shifted towards objects, processes and methods (Gross, Harmon, and Reidy, *Communicating Science*, 166). See also Dwight Atkinson, *Scientific Discourse in Sociohistorical Context: The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, 1675–1975* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999), xxviii.
- 25 See also Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 27.
- 26 The emphasis on the importance of neutrality as a psychological virtue can also be seen in various variations concerning a balanced view (see e.g. authorial guidelines from *Annual Review of Neuroscience* and *Trends in the Cognitive Sciences*), conflicts of interest (see e.g. *Synthese*, *Social Networks*, and *Russian Literature* guidelines), and the presentation (see e.g. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, and *Mind* guidelines).
- 27 See Wanner, *Deconstructing the English Passive*, 155–160.



## 4 Textual structures of research articles

In this chapter, I analyse the ideal(s) of textual structures inherent in the poetics of clarity as well as their degrees of standardisation. I focus specifically on prevalent ideals of textual structures beginning with an exploration of structural ideals in the guidelines. Then, I analyse the text examples in relation to these ideals. In the chapter, I show how the organisation of research articles follows a highly standardised and, at times, rigidly enforced ideal of textual structures, namely IMRAD. This is particularly marked within natural science and to some extent sociology. Meanwhile, the humanities are characterised by much more open and less rigidly enforced textual structures. Yet, as I show in the analysis, despite differences between disciplinary ideals of textual structures, most of the disciplines share a general set of poetic ideals of textual organisation, namely textual atomism and logical succession.

### The ideals of textual structure

In the guidelines from the natural sciences, the ideal structure of research articles is highly standardised. Here are some examples:

- 1 The text of articles reporting original research is usually divided into Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion sections. This so-called ‘IMRAD’ structure is not an arbitrary publication format but a reflection of the process of scientific discovery.

*(International Committee of Medical Journal  
Editors Recommendations, 12)*

- 2 These considerations have led to a format widely used in many scientific fields: division and sequencing of a report so that it explicitly appears with sections that can be headed sequentially Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion. [. . .] Further, a research paper is more likely to be clearly understood if the research is described in the sequence in which it was conceived, designed, and carried out, its results analyzed, and its conclusions reached; this chronological sequence corresponds to the sequence of critical argument.

*(Scientific Style and Format, 27.7.5.1)*



These examples illustrate the most common structure of research papers, namely the IMRAD structure, which is a division and systematic organisation of papers into pre-defined sequential sections (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion). However, it is particularly important to notice the recurrent claim that IMRAD mirrors the original research process. As the first example claims, the IMRAD structure ‘is not an arbitrary publication format but a reflection of the process of scientific discovery’. Here the ideal structure is presented as the natural way to present research. The second example links readability directly to textual structure, which it specifies, similarly to the first example, as presenting research ‘in the sequence in which it was conceived, designed, and carried out, its results analysed, and its conclusions reached’. Hence, the ideal way to present research is in a chronological sequence mirroring the steps of the actual research process. What follows from these assumptions is that the IMRAD structure imposes itself as the basic structure of scientific work as well as correlative with clarity. Meanwhile, writing practices are reduced to mirroring and reporting what happened.

Yet the claim that the textual structure mirrors research practices and consequently, that the IMRAD structure imposes itself from the research, can be contested. Indeed, the examples above can be contrasted with another example from *Scientific Style and Format*: ‘guidelines impose structure within a document, and this structure has important benefits for readers’.<sup>1</sup> This example marks a possible tension because there may be various guidelines that advocate other structures than the well-established IMRAD. Hence, while structure imposes itself in the earlier example, in this example structure is potentially imposed by the editors. This does not contradict the idea that the IMRAD structure is the natural way of organising research articles, but it opens a questioning of the direction of fit between research practices and textual structures. Hence, the naturalisation of IMRAD as a mirroring of research practices can be seriously doubted. Within the natural sciences, an influential alternative to IMRAD exists that challenges its ‘naturalness’. The alternative is visible in some high-impact journals:

- 1 Many authors find it useful to organize their manuscripts with the following order of sections: title page, abstract, Significance Statement, introduction, results, discussion, materials and methods, acknowledgments, references, and figure legends. Provided that authors present information clearly and concisely, other variations to this format are allowed.

(*PNAS* guidelines)

- 2 full-length articles generally contain the following sections in this order: Title, Authors, Affiliations, Contact Information, Additional Title Page Footnotes, Summary, Introduction, Results, Discussion, Experimental Procedures, Author Contributions, Acknowledgments, References, Figure and Table Legends, Figures and Tables, Graphical Abstract, and Supplemental Information.

(*Cell* guidelines)



The high-impact journals generally encourage authors to place the methods section after the results and discussion sections. In contrast to IMRAD, here is IRDAM. Thus, two ideal structures of scientific papers are visible in the guidelines:

IMRAD <sup>2</sup>	IRDAM <sup>3</sup>
Introduction	Introduction
Methods and Materials	Results
Results	Discussion/Conclusion
Discussion/Conclusion	Methods and Materials

IMRAD is disseminated widely, particularly in the neuroscience guidelines as well as in some top ranking journals (particularly medical journals) and sociology guidelines. Meanwhile, the IRDAM structure is exclusively present in a few guidelines from the top journals. Thereby, IMRAD can be understood as a general ideal of textual structure, while IRDAM is a powerful alternative. However, the standardisation and degrees of governing of textual structure vary dramatically between the different disciplines and journals. Interestingly, the IMRAD structure appears to be governed more strictly than the alternative. While the IRDAM structure is presented as a suggestion, the IMRAD takes on an almost dogmatic appearance as *the* reflection of the stages of scientific work, which marks a strong sense of naturalism. For example, the *ICMJE Recommendations* presents one of the strongest cases of the micro-governing of textual structure, since the governing does not stop with the prescription of a specific structure of scientific papers, even the content in each section is specified.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, specifications and degrees of governing of textual structure in the humanities and social sciences differ substantially from the ideals above. Within the humanities and social science guidelines, the ideal structure is seldom specified, but remains open and general. This is, for example, the case in two major style guides, namely *The Chicago Manual of Style* and the *ASA Style Guide*. While *The Chicago Manual of Style* is silent on the issue, the *ASA Style Guide* merely specifies the overall structure of a text as comprising a title page, an abstract, and the main text.<sup>5</sup> This vague specification of textual structure is also visible in these examples:

- 1 Sections in a manuscript may include the following: (1) Title page, (2) Abstract, (3) Text, (4) Notes, (5) References, (6) Tables, (7) Figures, and (8) Appendixes.  
*(American Sociological Review guidelines)*
- 2 As you continue to read, reread, and think about the ideas and information you have decided to use, you will begin to see new connections between items, and patterns of organization will suggest themselves. Bring related material together under general headings, and arrange



these sections so that one logically connects with another. Then order the subjects under each heading so that they, too, proceed logically. Finally, plan an effective introduction and a conclusion appropriate to the sequence you have worked out.

(*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 43)

These examples provide suggestions for textual structures, but they remain at a very general level in comparison with the specifications found in the natural science guidelines. In the first example, instead of specifying the different sections and their structural organisation, the main text remains unspecified.<sup>6</sup> The second example, from the *MLA Handbook*, specifies textual structure with more detail, when it suggests that the text includes an introduction and a conclusion. Thereby, the ideal structure is specified minimally as 'I . . . C', rather than IMRAD.<sup>7</sup> What is particularly striking in this example, however, is that apparently neither the research process nor the writing process follows a fixed pattern. This is also exemplified elsewhere in the *MLA Handbook*: 'the truth is that different paths can and do lead to successful research papers'.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere the *MLA Handbook* specifies the possible paths under the header of organising principles, such as chronology, cause and effect, process, deductive logic, and inductive logic.<sup>9</sup> Yet, no imperative determining the sequences of the research process exists. Hence, in contrast to the specification of IMRAD, in the *MLA Handbook* no strict ideal exists, but only a general demand for a complete logically coherent narrative (including introduction and conclusion). Yet, this example also expresses the belief that textual structure is imposed from the research, rather than an imposition of form on the research: 'patterns of organisation will suggest themselves'. This idea of self-organising research runs parallel with the idea of IMRAD as mirroring scientific working processes. However, an important difference occurs, namely that the sequence of organisation remains unspecified and open.

In contrast to this openness, stands the *APA Publication Manual* as an exception within the social sciences. The *APA Publication Manual* shares the same ideal structure (IMRAD) prevalent in the natural science guidelines, which is also seen as a reflection of the stages of the research.<sup>10</sup> Similar to the *ICMJE Recommendations*, the *APA Publication Manual* rigidly prescribes not only the overall structural level but all the way down to the content of each section.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, for example, the *ASA Style Guide* specifies the overall structure of a paper at a very general level. This places the discipline of sociology at an interesting borderline between a strict ideal of structure and an open structure. While the natural sciences appear to be divided between a dominant structural ideal (IMRAD) and an alternative (IRDAM), a chasm appears in sociology. This chasm reflects a deeply rooted tension within sociology between science and literature, which constitutes it as a *third culture*.<sup>12</sup> The chasm also marks a radical difference between structural ideals, and a boundary appears between the natural sciences (as well as part of the social sciences) and the human sciences (as well as part of the social sciences).<sup>13</sup>



*Structural ideals in the texts: standardisation or multiplicity?*

So far, I have demarcated the prevalent structural ideals enunciated with different degrees of rigidity in the guidelines. When structural ideals are explicated and prescribed (at times) strongly in the guidelines, they appear significant, but to get a closer sense of their importance I will now scrutinise the actual textual structures. By scrutinising textual structures, we may get a better indication of textual ideals and tendencies of standardisation. Moreover, when no structural ideals are explicated at the idealised plane of poetics (which was the case particularly in the humanities), this does not necessarily entail that no such ideals exist, because they may exist tacitly. Thus, to get closer the ideals, I will now shift my analytical perspective to the structures of actual journal articles.

From the viewpoint of the texts, the most common textual structure is IMRAD (17 of 50 texts).<sup>14</sup> This is particularly marked in neuroscience, where six out of ten texts<sup>15</sup> follow the IMRAD ideal, while only one text (from *The EMBO Journal*) follows the IRDAM structure.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the top journals are divided between four texts following the IMRAD structure (*Circulation*, *JAMA*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *The Lancet*), two texts following the IRDAM structure (*Nature*, *Cell*), and two texts with markedly different structures (*PNAS*, *Science*).<sup>17</sup> Thereby, the top journals are characterised by a heterogeneity of textual structures. This heterogeneity is possibly a product of the artificiality of the category ‘top journals’, which includes journals from different fields with potentially different textual ideals. The four texts that follow the IMRAD structure are all top medical journals. Meanwhile, the texts that break off from the IMRAD structure are general science journals that allow a much more open structure. Interestingly, the two texts that break off from both IMRAD and IRDAM are from journals where the guidelines suggested the IRDAM structure. Consequently, a less strict governing of textual structure within the top general science journals appears where authors can diverge from the standards, in contrast to a strictly regulated standard of IMRAD within neuroscience and medical journals.<sup>18</sup>

Even though the category ‘top journals’ shows a heterogeneity of possible textual structures, taken together with the examples from neuroscience, the category ‘top journals’ indicates a prevalence of the IMRAD structure not only as a structural ideal but as widely embodied textually in the natural science texts. This prevalence crosses disciplinary boundaries to include sociology where six out of ten texts<sup>19</sup> also follow the IMRAD structure. Many specifically high-impact sociology journals (four out of five) share the general IMRAD ideal. Thereby, the IMRAD structure is prevalent as a textual ideal of organisation in the natural science and high-impact sociology journals. However, sociology presents an interesting case, because even though the texts largely follow the IMRAD ideal, they all present significant variations from the pure IMRAD structure found in the natural science texts. These variations are what Sword designates as hybrid structures where uniquely titled sections cohabit with conventionally titled sections.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, the IMRAD variation found in sociology includes several sections



before the methods section such as *contextualisation*, *theoretical framework*, *hypotheses*. Yet, the results always come after the method, similar to the IMRAD structure. For example, these characteristic variations are present in the text from *Sociology*, which begins with an introduction that provides a background for the question and a brief literature review, before a section devoted to the broader political and historical context for the question and a section introducing the conceptual framework guiding the article. After these variations, the rest of the text follows the remaining structure of IMRAD. So despite textual variations, sociology also ascribes to IMRAD but in a less rigid fashion.

Nevertheless, we must also consider the rest of the texts in sociology (four out of ten)<sup>21</sup> that do not follow IMRAD, but rather reinstate the chasm within sociology described earlier. These four texts comprise subsections, but they neither follow the IMRAD nor IRDAM structure. Rather, they follow a general open structure beginning with an introduction and ending with a conclusion (without methods and results sections). For example, the text from *Souls* begins with an introduction that poses the central topic and question to be pursued as well as the broader context for the question and a brief positioning in relation to other research. After that follows two sections that contextualise the question historically and politically, then two sections that discuss the question empirically, before ending with a conclusion summarising the argument. This example shows a resemblance with the characteristic variance of the sociology texts in relation to the IMRAD, particularly the addition of contextualisation. But by omitting the core of IMRAD, the methods and results sections, the structures of these sociology texts remain more structurally open and flexible: ‘I . . . C’.

The open and flexible ‘I . . . C’ structure also characterises most text examples from philosophy (nine out of ten). Unsurprisingly, the IMRAD structure is not present in the philosophy examples because it specifically relates to empirical research. However, what might be more surprising is the heterogeneity of textual structures in the philosophy journals, which points to an absence of a prevalent structural ideal both in the guidelines and in the texts. Yet beneath the heterogeneity, a vague shadow of an ideal textual body appears in the text example from *Synthese*. This text comprises five sections: 1) an introduction to the problem, 2) a possible answer, 3) a possible reply (called ‘The dogmatic reply’), 4) the author’s alternative reply (called ‘A novel, ecumenical reply’), and finally 5) ‘Responses to objections’. *Do I see a ghost here? Or has the ideal textual body of scholastic philosophy been reincarnated (or did it ever leave us)?*<sup>22</sup>

Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* stands as a paradigmatic example of the ideal textual body characteristic of the scholastic method, where each article is structured according to a fixed pattern: 1) a question is raised, 2) objections (arguments supporting negative replies), 3) on the contrary (arguments supporting the opposite reply), 4) ‘I reply that’ (author’s own reply), and finally 5) replies to the objections are provided.<sup>23</sup> Admittedly, it is very different to read an article in the *Summa* than in *Synthese*: for example, the texts are different in terms of length and detail of argumentation as well as authority. However, at the overall structural level, i.e. the division into sections, a striking resemblance is visible:



<i>Summa Theologiae</i>	<i>Synthese</i> example
The question	Introducing the question
Objection(s)	The argument
On the contrary	A possible reply
Reply	The author's reply
Replies to objections	Replies to objections

While Aquinas' question stands alone at the beginning, the introduction to the problem and the question is put forward in more detail in the *Synthese* example. Furthermore, the argument presented in the *Synthese* example is closely related to the problem formulated and is what the author seeks to argue against. Yet the general structure of the *Synthese* example follows the argumentative structure of scholasticism even though the level of detail is significantly different. Here it must be noted, however, that I am not claiming the texts are identical, but rather pointing out a resemblance. Moreover, this potential ideal structure resembling scholasticism is not directly visible in other examples from philosophy, but some structural variations resemble the ideal and suggest that the parallel is more than a mere coincidence.

For example, the *Eidos* example consists of the following sections: 1) introduction to the problem, 2) first understanding, 3) alternative understanding, 4) preferred understanding, and 5) conclusion. What is striking in this example, is that section four resembles the 'I respond that' marked in the text by the sudden appearance of the first-person pronoun 'I' in the fourth section. The appearance of the 'I' marks a distinctive contrast to its absence in the previous sections. But even though parts of the text resemble the sections of the scholastic textual ideal, I must emphasise that it is, indeed, a ghost, rather than a reincarnation of the ideal I see here. This is further emphasised by the heterogeneity of textual structures across the text examples from philosophy, which in some cases include sections resembling the 'objections', 'on the contrary', 'I answer that', but not necessarily including all sections and not necessarily in that particular order.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, in other text examples from philosophy, textual structures resemble the open structure found in some sociology journals. This is particularly the case with articles that are partially empirical or discussing historical topics.<sup>25</sup> Thus, philosophy is characterised by a heterogeneity of textual structures, particularly concerning the ordering of sections.

Likewise, literary studies present a variety of textual structures. One text follows a variation of the IMRAD structure (*Poetics*). However, most texts have an open structure either subdivided into sections (five out of ten), but often without headlines or not even subdivided, but only minimally organised into paragraphs (four out of ten). Interestingly, the open structure characteristic of the texts in literary studies even transgresses the minimally organising framework of 'I . . . C', by leaving out a conclusion or reducing it to a few sentences.<sup>26</sup> This structural



organisation is radically different from the standardised IMRAD. Furthermore, by transgressing the minimally organising narrative of ‘I . . . C’, the texts from literary studies even break off from the otherwise open and fluid suggestions from the *MLA Handbook*.<sup>27</sup>

### *Trans-disciplinary structural ideals*

So far, my exploration of the textual structures has revealed drastic differences both in terms of ideal structures and in terms of degrees of standardisation. IMRAD is a highly standardised textual structure while its direct alternative IRDAM appears to be more unusual. Meanwhile, the textual structures within specifically philosophy and literary studies but to some extent also sociology were characterised by diversity and openness. Yet beneath these differences, a set of trans-disciplinary textual principles of organisation exists. In academic writing, there is a tendency to divide texts into smaller parts united by a logically successive narrative. Two basic principles of organisation, namely *textual atomism* and *logical succession* form this tendency.

*Textual atomism* concerns the division of a text into smaller elementary building blocks that form complex arguments. Division of research papers into sections is a basic structural ideal. For example, in *Scientific Style and Format* ‘division and sequencing of a report so that it explicitly appears with sections’ was recommended. Likewise, the *ICMJE Recommendations* prescribed that ‘the text of articles reporting original research is usually divided into Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion sections’.<sup>28</sup> Division is an integral part of the IMRAD ideal, but while the ideal of IMRAD was widely disseminated, it was not shared among all the disciplines. Meanwhile, the general ideal of division appears to be shared across disciplinary borders. Here are some further examples:

- 1 Divide the article into clearly defined and numbered sections.  
(*Poetics guidelines*)
- 2 Subheadings should clearly indicate the organization of the content of the manuscript.  
(*ASA Style Guide*, 4.2)
- 3 An article, like a chapter in a book, may be divided into sections and subsections headed by subheads, sub-subheads, and so on.  
(*The Chicago Manual of Style*, 1.91)

The first example emphasises that a paper should be divided into smaller parts, which must be clearly defined. What is interesting to notice here is how the suggested article structure splits up the scientific work into smaller units or building blocks and embodies a textual atomism. Likewise, the second example also underscores the importance of textual atomism for the organisation of texts. This is also the case in the third example with the difference that it presents a more general



idea of textual atomism without relating it to any sense of clarity. Yet, while the examples above present the ideal of textual atomism, they solely concern the division of the scientific paper into clearly defined sections, subsections, etc., not the connection between the sections nor their logical succession.

*Logical succession* is of central importance because the ideal of textual atomism cannot stand alone – the building blocks must be connected. The connection between textual atomism and logical succession was already visible in an earlier example from the *MLA Handbook*: ‘bring related material together under general headings, and arrange these sections so that one logically connects with another’. Here are some formulations of the importance of logical succession:

- 1 In scientific writing, sound organizational structure is the key to clear, precise and logical communication.

*(Publication Manual of APA, 62)*

- 2 Are the paragraphs and ideas clearly connected and appropriately arranged to point to the conclusion? Are the objectives clearly announced from the start and systematically pursued throughout the paper?

*(University of Bucharest Review, ‘Our Peer-Reviewing Policy’)*

- 3 If a section in the first draft seems unclear or sketchy, you may have to expand it by writing another sentence or two or even a new paragraph. Similarly, to improve the fluency and coherence of the paper, you may need to add transitions between sentences and paragraphs or to define connections or contrasts. Delete any material that is irrelevant, unimportant, repetitive, or dull and dispensable. If the presentation of ideas seems illogical or confusing, you may find that you can clarify by rearranging phrases, clauses, sentences, or paragraphs.

*(MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 46–47)*

The first example expresses a link between textual structure, and clarity and precision. Thereby, textual organisation is connected with the core poetic ideals. The second example stresses the importance of clear connections between paragraphs and ideas, but with the significant addition that they must point to the conclusion. Thus, the establishing of links between textual elements is important for the logical progression of a text. In the third example, the structure of a text to improve fluency and coherence entails the addition of transitions linking different sections, paragraphs, and sentences together. Indeed, this example establishes a close relationship between clarity and logical structure, which can be seen in the suggestion of clarifying through rearranging the text. Altogether, these examples of logical succession prescribe research articles to progress logically from beginning to ending. Furthermore, in the third example, it is worth noticing how the omission of irrelevant, dull, and unimportant material is suggested. The suggestion reveals linearity as part of the ideal of logical succession. This appears to be a prerequisite



for the construction of a coherent scientific narrative and marks a linkage to the ideal of textual economy. The dimension is further illustrated below:

- 1 Multiple-part papers are discouraged. Although this arrangement is sometimes necessary, authors will often be asked to collapse multiple papers into a single manuscript.

*(The Journal of Neuroscience guidelines)*

- 2 The argument should be laid out clearly.

*(Social Sciences and Missions guidelines)*

The first example underscores the importance of establishing a logically successive narrative that progresses linearly by discouraging multiple-part papers. Thereby the ideal of a successive scientific narrative entails an idea of one main argument. The ideal of one main argument is expressed by the choice of singular form in the second example: ‘the argument should be laid out clearly’. This ideal of an overall argument progressing logically is also expressed in the *MLA Handbook* where the importance of the soundness of the argument and writing a unified whole is pointed out.<sup>29</sup> And in *Scientific Style and Format*, the link between an ideal of the scientific narrative of succession as consisting of one argument is emphasised: ‘most scientific articles must have the structure of a critical argument’.<sup>30</sup> Here crucially we must notice how ‘argument’ is in the singular, which suggests, in line with the examples, that research papers must progress logically in their development of one main argument and that the different parts of a paper must be put in the service of logical succession.

Now a set of general organisational principles appear: an academic paper must present its content in a successive narrative with clearly marked and delimited building blocks, or in other words a combination of textual atomism and logical succession in the explication of one main argument. At the structural level, the ideal of clarity functions as governing the division and connection of a paper into a logically arranged, successive and coherent whole. Interestingly, this ideal of a successive scientific narrative based on a linear understanding of scientific work with marked boundaries of relevance, appears to be at work across the various disciplines analysed at the idealised plane of poetics. But what about the textual level?

Let me begin by exploring the ideal of textual atomism. Textual atomism can vary but must necessarily include a division into sections and/or subsections exceeding the paragraph (as exemplified in the prescriptions presented above). Most texts analysed embody the ideal of textual atomism but to different degrees. While the texts from philosophy and neuroscience consist of few segments, texts from sociology and particularly the top journals are highly segmented.<sup>31</sup> However, what really distinguishes the degrees of textual atomism within the different disciplines are the sizes of the segments. Here texts from neuroscience, the top journals, and sociology embody the strongest sense of atomism.<sup>32</sup> Thus, textual atomism appears to be textually embodied with different degrees ranging from a strong atomism in neuroscience and the top journals



to a weaker atomism in philosophy with sociology somewhere in between. Meanwhile, some literary studies texts present a radical difference from the standard segmented research article by being largely unsegmented.<sup>33</sup> These texts deviate from the general ideal of textual atomism. For example, the text from the *University of Bucharest Review* illustrates this deviation by its characteristic absence of textual units (sections, subsections, segments) and a sparse use of paragraph breaks. In the text, even the minimal means for textual division (i.e. the sentence) deviates from the other disciplines by being averagely longer. Consequently, literary studies appear to transgress the ideal of textual atomism and write outside its logic.

This does not necessarily entail that literary studies also inevitably break off from the ideal of logical succession. For example, while the text example from the *University of Bucharest Review* transgresses the ideal of textual atomism, it still comprises one main argument and a successive linking between paragraphs:

If poetry will effect, movere, docere, and delectare upon the reader, does it follow that, when ill-used, it will inspire injurious passions within the reader and exhort him to vice and sin? And if so, are the rules regarding the moral conduct of the poet which surface throughout late Renaissance rhetorical and poetical tracts designed to regulate and prevent this from happening?

One first clue which might hope to answer these questions may be found in Reynold's inclusion of 'Poetrie' into the category of 'Artes rationall Fancie'.  
(*University of Bucharest Review* research article example, 72)

In this example, an explicit link between paragraphs is provided in the first sentence of the second paragraph presented here, when it refers back to the previous questions posed and lays out a possible path to follow to answer them. This linkage between paragraphs is visible throughout the text marked by the opening of paragraphs with for example 'As a consequence' and 'As we have already discussed above'. This shows that even though texts from literary studies may break off from the ideal of textual atomism, they may however still ascribe to an overall ideal of textual succession. Indeed, the absence of divisions can emphasise a sense of succession. The text from the *University of Bucharest Review* presents an overall argument. Yet some texts from literary studies do not put forward an overall argument and in some cases end without concluding remarks.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, some texts from literary studies appear to transgress the ideal of a linearly and logically progressing argument by not leading up to a conclusion.

Another example that transgresses the demand of a linearly and logically progressing argument is a text from sociology, specifically from *Souls*. Even though the text from *Souls* has a conclusion, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the section just before the conclusion. While the overall text is dealing with the importance of name choices in the Black Power movement at the personal level, the section before the conclusion expands the question to concern group identity. Admittedly, this expansion of the question can be seen as broadening the argument, which



points to a difficulty of assessing whether details are relevant or irrelevant as well as when an argument is uniform. However, the reflections and discussion put forward in that section are not visible in the conclusion, where the overall argument is put forward. Thus, the section coming before the conclusion appears to be sidestepping the argument, rather than developing it. Hence, the ideal of linear, logical succession from introduction to conclusion can be transgressed either by, e.g. not leading to a clear-cut conclusion or by comprising multiple parts that do not establish a uniform argument. Yet, most of the texts analysed appear to be written within and fluctuate between the principles of atomism and logical succession except primarily literary studies texts, which seem to transgress both textual principles of organisation.<sup>35</sup>

### **Summary**

Here I have explored the ideal textual structures of research articles. Particularly one structure is prevalent, namely the IMRAD structure. The ideal of the IMRAD structure is distributed widely within the natural science texts as well as particularly in the high-impact sociology texts, where a hybrid structure is used. Even though IMRAD is the dominant structural ideal, other structural ideals exist with different degrees of specificity and rigidity (e.g. IRDAM and 'I...C'). Particularly the texts from philosophy and literary studies embody an open structure. However, beneath these disciplinary variations resides a set of widely disseminated general ideals of textual organisation, namely textual atomism and logical succession that secure the construction and progression of one main argument. While the degrees of atomism and succession vary in the different texts, most texts embody a variation of these organisational principles. Meanwhile, some literary studies texts appear to transgress the general structural ideals inherent in the poetics of clarity and indicate an alternate structural (non-)ideal of variability and singularity.

### **Notes**

- 1 *Scientific Style and Format*, 1.2.
- 2 Found in the following guidelines: *Annals of Neurosciences*, *Biological Psychiatry*, *Circulation*, *ICMJE Recommendations*, *Journal of Clinical Neurology*, *Neuromodulation*, *Neuropsychological Trends*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Poetics*, *Publication Manual of APA*, *Scientific Style and Format*, *Social Networks*, *The Egyptian Journal of Neurology*, *Psychiatry and Neurosurgery*, *The Journal of Neuroscience*, and *The Lancet*.
- 3 Found in the following authorial guidelines: *Cell*, *Nature*, *PNAS*, *Science*, *The EMBO Journal*.
- 4 *ICMJE Recommendations*, 14–15. Another example of a strong micro-governing of the structure and content of research papers is found in *JAMA*.
- 5 *ASA Style Guide*, 41–42.
- 6 This openness is also found in the following guidelines – in sociology: *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Eastern European Countryside*, *Fathering*, *Social Networks*, *Social Sciences and Missions*, *Sociology*; in philosophy: *Eidos*, *Ethics*, *Public Reason*, *Synthese*; in literary studies: *American Literary History*.



- 7 Sometimes in the humanities and sociology, the final section is entitled ‘Conclusion’, rather than or separate from the ‘Discussion’ (see e.g. *Poetics* guidelines; *MLA Handbook*, 43; and *Social Sciences and Missions* guidelines). The section entitled ‘Conclusion’ has some similarities with the discussion section in the IMRAD structure. Even though the discussion section is usually more extensive it is also used to present conclusions and as a summary of the main findings (see e.g. *Publication Manual of APA*, 35; *Annals of Neurosciences* guidelines, and *The Journal of Neuroscience* guidelines).
- 8 *MLA Handbook*, 4.
- 9 *MLA Handbook*, 44.
- 10 *Publication Manual of APA*, 10
- 11 *Publication Manual of APA*, 27–36.
- 12 Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science*, 7.
- 13 This chasm is even more marked than what Sword finds in her analysis of the recommendations of standard structures in writing guides, where 84% of science guidelines but only 52% of humanities guidelines recommend a standard structure (*Stylish Academic Writing*, 28).
- 14 Gross, Harmon, and Reidy also find IMRAD to be the prevalent structure of scientific papers (*Communicating Science*, 185).
- 15 From *Annals of Neurosciences*, *Biological Psychiatry*, *Journal of Clinical Neurology*, *Neuromodulation*, *The Egyptian Journal of Neurology, Psychiatry and Neurosurgery*, and *The Journal of Neuroscience*.
- 16 The last three texts analysed in this category are trend or review articles (from *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, *Neuropsychological Trends*, and *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*), which have a markedly different form, but because they are from a different genre, they do not challenge the IRDAM ideal.
- 17 The last two texts are review articles (*Chemical Reviews* and *Physical Review Letters*).
- 18 This also finds support in Sword’s analysis, where all medicine articles analysed employed the standard IMRAD structure (*Stylish Academic Writing*, 123).
- 19 *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Eastern European Countryside*, *Fathering*, *Social Forces*, and *Sociology*.
- 20 Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 123.
- 21 Namely the texts from *Social Networks*, *Social Evolution and History*, *Social Sciences and Missions*, and *Souls*.
- 22 I am grateful to Søren Gosvig Olesen, for pointing out the historical parallel.
- 23 Jan A. Aertsen, ‘Aquinas’s philosophy in its historical setting’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 18–19.
- 24 See e.g. the texts from *Ethics*, *Krisis*, and *Nous*.
- 25 See e.g. the texts from *Public Reason*, *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, and *Journal of Consciousness Studies*.
- 26 This is visible in the texts from *American Literary History*, *New Literary History*, *PMLA*, *Romance Studies*, *Russian Literature*, and *Word and Text*.
- 27 This is in line with Sword’s findings that texts from the humanities consist of unique structures, hybrid structures, and sequential structures (sections that are numbered but not titled) (*Stylish Academic Writing*, 123).
- 28 *ICMJE Recommendations*, 12.
- 29 *MLA Handbook*, 34, 42.
- 30 *Scientific Style and Format*, 27.7.5.1.
- 31 In philosophy, the texts on average consisted of six segments per text, in neuroscience the average was eight segments, in sociology the average was 11 segments, and in the top journals the average was 15 segments per text. I have excluded *Chemical Reviews* and *Physical Reviews Letters* from the average because both texts were outliers.



- 32 In the neuroscience texts, each segment consisted of an average of 475 words, in comparison with 542 words per segment in the top journal texts, 768 words per segment in the sociology texts, 1374 words per segment in the philosophy texts, and 2967 words per segment in the literary studies texts.
- 33 Four out of ten texts from literary studies as well as one from philosophy.
- 34 See for example the texts from *American Literary History*, *New Literary History*, *Romance Studies*, and *Russian Literature*.
- 35 See the text examples from *American Literary History*, *New Literary History*, *Philosophia Reformata*, *PMLA*, *Romance Studies*, *Russian Literature*, *Social Evolution and History*, and *Journal of Consciousness Studies*.



## Part II

# Reflections on the consequences for thinking

In the previous part, I demonstrated how the poetics of clarity is widely distributed across disciplinary borders. Yet the poetics of clarity is not a harmonious space for textual production, but rather constitutes a multi-dimensional field of tension. In this part, I will reflect on how this poetics may have implications beyond writing, and pursue my second main question: what are the consequences of the ideal of clarity for thinking within academia? My move to the second main question entails a change from an analytical-descriptive to a critical-polemical stance. Even though I now change my approach, the reflections develop as a back-and-forth movement drawing on the previous analyses. However, it must be noted that my reflections are selective and limited, and that my exploration of the poetics of clarity has produced more questions and uncertainties than I can treat here. Through a focus on tensions and restrictions, I will unfold some important discussions of the potential implications of the poetics of clarity for thinking within academia. Admittedly, I have mainly focused on the constraining and limiting aspects of clarity. Still, I have found it important to focus on what may be constraining, because this dimension seems to be repressed or forgotten in most literature dealing with clarity. The discussion will gradually unfold the argument that the poetics of clarity inscribes thinking in a negative dialectic: clarity is paramount for the development and progression of thinking, yet also constraining because it subordinates crucial parts of knowledge production and potentially inhibits thinking within contemporary academia.





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## 5 The unstable distinction between form and content

Throughout my exploration of the poetics of clarity, a distinction between *form* and *content* has been present in the empirical material, but so far I have left it unthematized. Now I will thematize this distinction because it would be unsatisfactory, maybe even careless, to leave it unexplored. In its generality, the distinction between form and content in its diverse guises has a long and complicated history. For example, two influential perspectives have shaped the debate in literary theory – *dualism* and *monism*. From a dualist perspective, form (or style) solely concerns choices of *manner* (i.e. ways of writing), rather than *matter* (or content), and content can be re-formed without being transformed.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, from a monist perspective, manner and matter are intertwined, and any alteration of form entails a transformation of the content.<sup>2</sup> However, I neither aim at nor pretend to settle such controversies here. Rather, my aim is to show how a strict yet unstable division between form and content is operative within the poetics of clarity. Indeed, as I will argue, within the poetics of clarity, paradoxically, form and content are separated and unified simultaneously. This is important because it may give credibility to the claim that the poetics of clarity has implications not only for writing but also for thinking.

But given I want to discuss the implications of the poetics of clarity for thinking, perhaps you would expect me to argue that form and content are intertwined – how else could writing possibly matter for thinking? Yet, to claim that form and content are inseparable in academic writing would entail several problems. For example, if form and content are inseparable, paraphrasing a text would become troublesome nay impossible because it would also necessarily alter the meaning. While the possibility of the paraphrase is unlikely to be denounced in everyday language use, it is questionable, for instance, in poetry.<sup>3</sup> Brooks has famously formulated the *heresy of the paraphrase* as the error of believing a poem can be reduced to a message.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, to argue that form and content are inseparable in academic writing and deny scientific language the possibility of the paraphrase would render academic writing to work akin to poetry. Typically, monism finds its strongest arguments in poetry, where the referential function loses its primacy.<sup>5</sup> Or as Benjamin polemically puts it: ‘no poem is intended for its reader’.<sup>6</sup> So it is possible to argue that the primary function of a poem is not to transmit a specific message. Rather, for example, as Hepburn has argued, poetry (at least in



its purity) does not refer to the world but simply is.<sup>7</sup> However, in the case of academic writing, it would not be a particularly attractive outcome to conflate science and poetry, because this would efface the primacy of the ideational function. Furthermore, it would become difficult to distinguish different uses of language such as poetry and scientific writing if their functions were assimilated.<sup>8</sup> Thus, my aim here is not to assimilate academic writing to poetry as a branch of literature.

Instead, I want to take a more viable route, and show how the strict distinction between form and content inherent in the poetics of clarity is resting on uncertain ground. This is important because a strict dualism between form and content is ‘wretchedly inconvenient’<sup>9</sup> since it renders it impossible to say anything about how the poetics of clarity may have implications for thinking. But rather than trying to show that form and content are intertwined in academic writing, I aim at showing how the distinction is unstable within the poetics of clarity. Thus, I do not intend to settle whether form and content can be separated in academic writing. On the contrary, I am solely focusing on how the distinction is operative within the poetics of clarity, specifically how a strict separation between form and content is presupposed, yet breaks down.

In my exploration of the poetics of clarity, the distinction between form and content has been repeatedly visible in various examples from my empirical material both as a general distinction and as concerning different levels of language use (e.g. sentence formation, authorial positioning, and textual structure). At each of these levels, a dividing line between form and content is drawn, and yet as I will show, after closer scrutiny this line cannot be sustained. Now I will return to my earlier analyses and draw out specific examples of the distinction between form and content, and where necessary supplement with further examples from the empirical material to specify what the distinction designates and at what levels of textual production it operates.

Within the poetics of clarity, the separation between form and content is usually taken for granted as a self-given division. Across disciplinary borders, a dividing line is drawn between the substance of the research (the content) and its expression (the form). For example, the *Physical Review Letters* guidelines draw a distinction between the complexity of mathematical material and the clarity of presentation. And the *MLA Handbook* distinguishes between form and content when effective writing is described as depending ‘as much on clarity and readability as on content’.<sup>10</sup> Thereby, a division between form and content is taken for granted, and clarity is seen purely as a manner of presentation. Inherent in the separation of the clarity of expression from the content lies the fundamental tenet that *content matters*, while form must facilitate the expression of the content without calling attention to itself and hence work in the background. This tenet is also visible in a previous example from the *APA Publication Manual* that explicitly underscores the importance of making sure intellectual energy is focused on the substance of the research without distractions.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the *Synthese* guidelines claim: ‘a clear and concise language will help editors and reviewers concentrate on the scientific content’.<sup>12</sup> In its generality, the distinction between form and content presupposes the possibility of separating form and content. In this separation,



form is subordinated the content, and clarity primarily concerns how the privileged content may be expressed without distractions.

In the poetics of clarity, clarity is a textual attribute that can be changed without changing the content. Thereby, clarity is reduced to the appropriate dress for the public appearance of the content.<sup>13</sup> The distinction plays on a metaphor of language as a vessel of meaning, reducing language to its communicative function to convey thoughts. As Spencer points out, if language is a vehicle of thought, the main thing to be done in the composition is to reduce friction and inertia of the vehicle to secure efficiency.<sup>14</sup> In this way, clarity is understood as external to scientific practices and thinking, but important for the communication of thoughts. Thus, within the poetics of clarity, form is subordinated as a method for expressing thoughts, and it must operate in the background as a transparent medium. Or as Barthes formulates it:

For science, language is merely an instrument, which it chooses to make as transparent, as neutral as possible, subjugated to scientific matters (operations, hypotheses, results), which are said to exist outside it and to precede it: on one side and *first of all*, the contents of the scientific message, which are everything; and on the other and *afterwards*, the verbal form entrusted with expressing these contents, which is nothing.<sup>15</sup>

When the form is understood as a transparent instrument of the content and writing is reduced to a method, an ideology of transparency rules.<sup>16</sup> This ideology is tied to the development of science. According to Derrida, the scientific adventure of the West is dominated by a dream of immediate, transparent access to truth without mediation, and in this horizon of absolute knowledge, writing is subordinated to the content (and ideally effaced) as a mere sensible means.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Rorty has pointed out, in a mature science words are supposed to be as few and as transparent as possible.<sup>18</sup> Thereby, scientific writing is subjected to a demand for transparency. Within the poetics of clarity, the ideal of transparency is related to the emphasis on a velocity of consumption, where consumption ideally resembles seeing by being direct, instant, immediate. The privileging of vision at the basis of knowledge production entails that language must act as a window without mist through which thoughts are presented. This ideal also resonates with Adorno's claim that science is allergic to form in the sense that presentation should be detached from what it presents and function as a paraphrase of e.g. the calculations carried out.<sup>19</sup> Thus, form is understood as something that must stay in the background not drawing attention away from the key points and findings that must be directly accessible (or visible).

Now, in the heart of the poetics of clarity appears an ideal of *zero style* as a style devoid of style.<sup>20</sup> Or as expressed by Day and Gastel: 'in scientific writing, readers should notice mainly the content, not the style'.<sup>21</sup> This ideal presupposes the possibility of a writing devoid of style to present the content in its uncontaminated purity and reduces style to an adornment.<sup>22</sup> But just as an expressionless face still has an expression, even a zero style remains a style.<sup>23</sup> Academic writing



needs the zero style to detach itself from style (and the associations of literature and rhetoric) and mark that its proper focus is on the substance of the research.<sup>24</sup> The ideal of a zero style embodies a dream of eliminating every ornamental textual element and let the content present itself directly and immediately without distractions.

So far, I have scrutinised the distinction between form and content at a very general level. Now I will dig deeper for more specific determinations of the separation between form and content in the poetics of clarity to show how it operates at various textual levels. I begin by exploring the level of sentence formation where formulations of the distinction between form and content closely resemble the general formulations above.

At the level of sentence formation, the distinction between form and content concerns the choice of words and sentence composition in the transmission of thoughts from writer to reader. For example, as the *MLA Handbook* explicates: ‘in all writing, the challenge is to find the words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs that express your thoughts and ideas precisely’.<sup>25</sup> This example not merely subordinates language use as serving thoughts and ideas, but also specifies the levels ranging from the choice of words to paragraphs. Meanwhile, in the *APA Publication Manual*, the specific distractions that scientific writing should be stripped of are explicated particularly pertaining to poetic devices that may attract attention to language instead of ideas.<sup>26</sup> Thereby, the separation of form and content appears to be drawing on a clear-cut distinction between poetic language and scientific language. Ideally, scientific writing should be an embodiment of a pure zero style of writing without colouring.

Besides the ideal of a pure zero style of writing, another colouring must also be kept outside scientific writing within the poetics of clarity, namely subjective colouring. While authorial positioning is inscribed in a paradoxical ideal of dis-engaged engagement, the researchers-in-the-texts are effaced. Indeed, within the poetics of clarity, a poetics of authorial effacement is at work related to the dictum explicated by Strunk and White: ‘place yourself in the background’. In their formulation of this dictum, a variant of the ideal of zero style applied to authorial positioning becomes visible: ‘write to draw attention to sense and substance not mood and temper’.<sup>27</sup> This dictum distinguishes the ‘sense and substance’ from the ‘mood and temper’ of the writer(s), and an ideal of neutrality is presupposed, which secures the transparency of the content. Thus, emotions, biases, moods, etc. must be left outside the presentation: only a neutral objective self-controlled author is acceptable in the transparent presentation of the content. Authorial positioning reduced to the zero degree entails that the researchers-in-the-texts step into the background and let the content appear uncontaminated.

The divorce between form and content also concerns textual structure where the general preconception that structure is imposed from the research circulates across structural ideals ranging from the rigid IMRAD to the open and flexible ideal. For example, the *ICMJE Recommendations* describes IMRAD as reflecting the scientific process of discovery. And the *APA Publication Manual* suggests that disciplining writing to follow an outline better preserves the logic



of the research itself.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, in the *MLA Handbook*, the writing process is described as a more spontaneous process, where ‘patterns of organization will suggest themselves’. But even though these examples are dissimilar, they share a reduction of writing to a reflection of the research. Across disciplinary borders, textual structure is reduced to a *zero degree* imposed from the research securing that the content is presented clearly and logically.

Yet at the level of textual structure, a surprisingly palpable example of the uncertain line separating form and content appears: even though textual structure must act as a neutral presentation of the research, when textual structure is conceived as mirroring, form and content are also entangled, because the textual structure curiously becomes a textual embodiment of the scientific process. For example, when IMRAD, on the one hand, is prescribed independently of specific research topics as the best way to present them, but, on the other hand, is seen as a reflection of the stages of the research, textual structures and research processes are simultaneously separated and unified. The naturalisation of IMRAD as a reflection of the scientific process of discovery removes scientific practices from writing but also ties scientific practices and textual structures together through a supposedly shared organisation. Even if writing is conceived as passive reporting, as long as the assumption that the reporting reflects the actual research stages is sustained, form and content are closely tied together. Thus, in the separation of textual structure and research, they are entangled – the form is no longer completely detached from the content. Thereby, the dividing line between form and content begins to dissolve.

Meanwhile, the example from the *MLA Handbook* is more complicated, because even though textual structure can also be seen as imposed from the research, writing is not conceived as a passive reporting. Consider this example:

As you get closer to writing, you begin to shape the information you have at hand into a unified, coherent whole by framing a thesis statement for your paper: a single sentence that formulates both your topic and your point of view. [. . .] Moreover, since the experience of writing may well alter your original plans, do not hesitate to revise the thesis statement as you write the paper. (*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 42)

This example presents two important conceptions of writing in the *MLA Handbook*. First, it presents writing as an integral part of the research, but not necessarily integrated from the beginning. Second, even though writing is not an essential part of research from the beginning, it may alter the content. Thus, writing is not merely a passive reporting, but an active process that (trans)forms the content of the research. When writing is taken to be an active process forming the research, form and content are always already intertwined. Here the question of the directions of fit between research and textual structure becomes meaningless because they are deeply entangled in the writing process and the dividing line between form and content dissolves. Despite the radical differences in the conceptions of the writing process (passive reporting vs. active forming), at the level of textual structure, the dividing line between form and content is blurred.



But what about the other levels? If form is taken generally (and vaguely) to designate the manner of presentation and more concretely the choice of words and sentence composition, all disciplines seem to agree on a clear-cut distinction between form and content, where form must work in the background serving as a mere messenger. Likewise, in the special case of authorial positioning, the form of the presentation must be rid of subjective mood, temper, and bias, and function neutrally without distractions. However, a tension lurks beneath this apparently clear-cut distinction, because if the quality of the language is central for the understanding of the content, this entails that the form is critical for the presentation of the research. The unification of form and content is hidden beneath the rigid separation as a paradox which entails that the separation is also a unification: every time the distinction is drawn it collapses. Zero style is a style that serves the content without distraction, but curiously this leads to an unsettling of the rigid separation between form and content because form must be perfectly integrated with the content to disappear.

When form is specified to follow a stylistic ideal of zero style, it must stay in the background. This entails that other forms can stand in the way of the content and thus be less well-integrated with the content. However, this does not entail that monism rules (i.e. that any content is strictly tied to a particular form), because there may be several possible variations of forms suitable to present a research project; yet strict dualism cannot be maintained because the research cannot be completely detached from the form. Indeed, as Bourdieu has argued, acceptable forms cannot be seen as mere external clothing; rather the content is unthinkable outside the known forms and recognised norms.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the apparently clear-cut distinction between form and content is unstable within the poetics of clarity, and the presumed strict division of form and content in the poetics of clarity collapses.

What might have appeared as a distinctive hierarchical boundary between form and content in the poetics of clarity has become blurred and complex. Here I have multiplied complexity and unfolded tensions. Yet this muddy picture indicates an important tension inherent in the distinction between form and content within the poetics of clarity: both in general, and at the different textual levels, the distinction collapses. The subordination of writing as a secondary medium that should operate silently in the background relies on a specific form (zero style) that must be suitable for the content to remain in the background. In other words, the privileging of the content rests on a demarcation of form and content, which, nonetheless, ties them together, because the form must blend in naturally with the content. Thus, in the ideal of zero style, the form/content separation is simultaneously a unification, because of the necessary fit between form and content. This paradox unsettles the dividing line between form and content.

## Notes

- 1 Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 13. See also Richard M. Coe, “‘An Arousing and Fulfilment of Desires’: The Rhetoric of Genre in the Process Era – and Beyond”, in



- Genre and the New Rhetoric*, ed. Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1994), 181–190, 182.
- 2 Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 17. See also Coe, ‘An Arousing and Fulfilment of Desires’, 182.
  - 3 Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 20.
  - 4 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (Cornwall, NY: The Cornwall Press, 1947), 184–185. However, as Igarashi has pointed out, despite his memorable catchphrase, Brooks is actually ambivalent towards paraphrasing (‘Statistical Analysis at the Birth of Close Reading’, 500).
  - 5 Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 21.
  - 6 Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, in *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 253/‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV/1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 9.
  - 7 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Literary and Logical Analysis’, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 8 (1958), 343–344.
  - 8 See also Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985), 242–243.
  - 9 I have borrowed this phrase from I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1971), 12.
  - 10 *MLA Handbook*, 49.
  - 11 *Publication Manual of APA*, xiii.
  - 12 *Synthese* guidelines. There are several other guidelines describing the editing process in terms of the form/content distinction. See e.g. *Circulation, Romance Studies, Science, and Social Forces*.
  - 13 See also Coe, ‘An Arousing and Fulfilment of Desires’, 182.
  - 14 Spencer, *The Philosophy of Style*, 12.
  - 15 Roland Barthes, ‘From Science to Literature’, in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 3–10, 4/‘De la science à la littérature’, in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), 14.
  - 16 James Clifford, ‘Introduction: Partial Truths’, in *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 2.
  - 17 Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 41.
  - 18 Richard Rorty, ‘Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida’, *Literary Hermeneutics* 10 (1978), 145.
  - 19 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Der Essay als Form’, in *Gesammelte Schriften 11: Noten zur Literatur*, vol. 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 12–14.
  - 20 My use of the concept *zero style* is inspired by Derrida’s description of a *zero-degree language* (that he sees as characteristic of the alphabetical language) in which the signifier is withdrawn providing a direct passage to the signified (see *De la grammatologie*, 423). In *Le degré zéro de l’écriture*, Barthes uses a similar concept, when he describes the transparent form of speech initiated by Camus’ *L’étranger* as achieving a style of absence, which is almost an absence of style (see Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l’écriture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1953), 109–110).
  - 21 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 11.
  - 22 See also Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 13–15.
  - 23 Berel Lang, *Philosophy and the Art of Writing. Studies in Philosophical and Literary Style* (London; Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1983), 63. See also John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 5.
  - 24 Gosvig Olesen has proposed a similar argument concerning philosophical writing (see Søren Gosvig Olesen, *La philosophie dans le texte* (Trans-Europ-Repress, 1982), 35). I believe that it is possible to expand this basic argument to concern the use of zero



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style to textually detach a text from textual characteristics associated with literature and rhetoric.

25 *MLA Handbook*, 49.

26 *APA Publication Manual*, 70

27 Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, 70

28 *Publication Manual of APA*, 70

29 Pierre Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire. L'économie des échanges linguistiques* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 170.



## 6 Phrase regimes, genres, and the expulsion of metaphors

In this chapter, I want to dwell on two characteristics of sentence formation within the poetics of clarity: the privileging of the declarative sentence and the tacit banishment of poetic devices such as metaphors. By focusing on these aspects, I want to speculate about what may happen if thinking is demanded to be embodied in direct declarative sentences with clear univocal meanings characterised by absolute clarity. I begin by discussing the construction of sentences in the light of Lyotard's philosophy of phrases. Then, I turn to the matter of poetic devices, focusing specifically on metaphors. Altogether, I wish to argue that the narrowing of sentence types and delimitation of metaphors risk entrapping thinking within too strict boundaries.

To briefly recall; in the analysis of sentence formation, I showed that across disciplinary borders sentences form arrhythmic patterns, yet the declarative sentence type dominates especially within the natural sciences. Now I want to discuss what may happen if thinking mainly occurs within this framework. To do this, Lyotard's philosophy of phrases delivers a set of concepts that may help to conceptualise this reduction of language to its ideational function. Perhaps the demand for direct declarative sentences can be understood as what Lyotard designates as a *phrase regime*. For Lyotard, a phrase regime entails that 'a phrase, even the most ordinary one, is constituted according to a set of rules'.<sup>1</sup> Phrase regimes are different syntactic types that phrases can belong to (e.g. descriptive, prescriptive or interrogative).<sup>2</sup> As such, Lyotard's description of phrases runs parallel with Wittgenstein's conception of *language games*.<sup>3</sup> What characterises different phrase regimes is that they are heterogeneous modes of presentation that present a universe in radically different ways.<sup>4</sup> For example, an absolute abyss exists between a cognitive phrase that demands verification of its descriptions and a prescriptive phrase that cannot be derived from a cognitive phrase.<sup>5</sup> However, Lyotard abandons the concept of language games, because, for him, it implies players using language as a toolbox.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, 'phrases' for Lyotard entails that 'the so-called players were on the contrary situated by phrases in the universes those phrases present, "before" any intention'.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, phrases call upon and situate language users within a phrasal universe comprising addresser, addressee, sense and reference.

But what is a *phrase*? According to Bennington, it would be better to translate *phrase* as *sentence*, because it would be more correct to think of the *phrase* as a



unity rather than as a fragment of a larger unity.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Lyotard also describes the phrase as the language atom.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, I follow Van Den Abbeele's translation and use *phrase*, because it marks a close relationship with the French verb *phraser*, which means 'to form sentences'. Lyotard's conception of the *phrase* has a wide extension that includes utterances at various levels ranging from words and sentences to non-linguistic significations, such as gestures.<sup>10</sup> Yet Lyotard leaves the concept 'phrase' undefined. Why? Because 'a definition is a phrase that obeys logical and cognitive rules'.<sup>11</sup> Thus, to define phrase would necessarily inscribe it in a particular phrase regime at the expense of its place in other regimes.<sup>12</sup> Despite its wide (and vague) extension, the concept *phrase* and particularly the idea of phrase regimes as heterogeneous and the question about what can be phrased may be useful for reflecting on the limitations of thinking inherent in the poetics of clarity.

Now I find it particularly pressing to consider what this idea of heterogeneous universes entails for thinking within the poetics of clarity. If we accept that phrase regimes are heterogeneous, it follows that a reduction of language use to the declarative sentence leads to a limiting of what can be phrased, i.e. the options for presenting the world and the stances of the observers are constrained. This is particularly marked in the examples from the natural sciences, which largely comprise uniform occurrences of a cognitive descriptive phrasing in the exposition of the world and its hidden features. However, a greater variety of phrase regimes such as conditional, interrogative, and exclamatory types occurs in the humanities and sociology. This marks a broader scope of possibilities for presenting the world, posing questions, reflecting, and developing critique. Yet, we must not be blinded by such disciplinary variances, because the texts from the humanities and sociology also mainly consist of declarative sentences. Thus, tendencies towards homogenisation exist that might limit the modes of presentation and thinking within the poetics of clarity.

So far, I have focused exclusively on phrase regimes, but phrases are never alone. There are always other phrases coming before or after, and the linking between phrases is crucial albeit radically contingent.<sup>13</sup> As long as the linking remains contingent, an indefinite number of phrases remains possible.<sup>14</sup> However, this contingency is drastically reduced by genres of discourse:

From one phrase regimen (descriptive, cognitive, prescriptive, evaluative, interrogative . . .) to another, a linkage cannot have pertinence. [. . .] A genre of discourse determines what is at stake in linking phrases: to persuade, to convince, to vanquish, to make laugh, to make cry, etc. It may be opportune to link onto the chain in a nonpertinent way in order to achieve one or another of these effects. Teleology begins with genres of discourse, not with phrases. Insofar, though, as they are linked together, phrases are always caught up in one (or at least one) genre of discourse.<sup>15</sup>

Phrases do not have teleology by themselves but are teleological qua being inscribed within one or more genres of discourse. The genres of discourse determine the proper ways to link phrases and the directions (i.e. their goals, e.g. 'to persuade')



that a series of phrases can move in. A genre of discourse imposes a mode of linking on phrases and onto us as authors or addressees.<sup>16</sup> Every genre aims at constraining and abolishing the contingency of what will be said next.<sup>17</sup> Genres suggest a pseudo-necessity.<sup>18</sup> This pseudo-necessity is visible in the description of IMRAD as the natural way of presenting research, namely as a mirroring of the research practices. This ideal structure inscribes a specific teleology that homogenises the types of phrases and their linking. For example, the monotonous droning rhythm characteristic of the methods sections of the natural science texts is specifically constituted by a linking that does not aim at arguing or persuading, but solely describing what was done. This linking appears to form a subsection of the natural science papers. Meanwhile, the IMRAD structure, in general, carves out a path directed towards results and conclusions discussed in the context of related research. More broadly, however, the trans-disciplinary ideal of logical succession of preferably one main argument establishes a teleological constraint that determines the proper ways of linking from introduction to conclusion. Perhaps then, the poetics of clarity can be understood as a genre of discourse that inscribes thinking within a teleological constraint and homogenises it to a cognitive descriptive endeavour that reduces how the world can be presented.

This tendency towards homogenisation of knowledge production within the poetics of clarity may be problematic because every linkage is a victory of one over others.<sup>19</sup> Thus, there might be many possible ways of linking just as multiple irreducible genres exist, but only one actual that represses others, and in this repression something may be lost. For example, as Lyotard argues, a tragic dialogue is impossible to translate to a cognitive discourse, because it makes certain effects that the translation loses.<sup>20</sup> Something gets lost in translation from one genre to another because no genre can encompass all discourses: here enters *the differend*.<sup>21</sup> More than merely a matter of dissensus, the differend marks a radical incommensurability between genres of discourse. An incommensurability that entails that no common ground exists from where to judge discourses. You may prefer the dialogue to the research article, but it is undecidable.<sup>22</sup> The dialogue and the research article can do different things. Indeed, it may not be possible to treat some phenomena adequately within a genre – something might not fit.<sup>23</sup> Hence, given the degree of homogenisation within the poetics of clarity in terms of teleology and sentence types, thinking is largely constrained to follow a cognitive descriptive path that potentially reduces the possibility of drawing on other effects of discourse, modes of presentation, and ways of thinking.

Yet this polemical conclusion must be nuanced because it rests on a set of assumptions that can be challenged: first, because I may have presupposed a too strict sense of genre (which Lyotard does not subscribe to himself) and, second, because it presupposes the heterogeneity of phrases and incommensurability of phrase regimes without critical evaluation.

When applying Lyotard's philosophy of phrases, we must be careful not to assume a *tyranny of genre*.<sup>24</sup> Rather than presuming a tyranny of genre, Lyotard promotes the capacity for improvisation and the openness to the singular character of the present occasion.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is important to recognise the openness and



possibility of difference in spite of genre restrictions or poetic norms. The presumed tyranny of genre is already loosened by Lyotard's description of phrases as 'always caught up in one (or at least one) genre of discourse'. Here the parenthesis is crucial because it loosens the otherwise strict formulation of phrases as always being 'caught up in' a genre of discourse. Consequently, a genre of discourse does not delimit all options of phrasing. This understanding also finds support from a genre theoretical viewpoint, because genres are dynamic, rather than stable and texts participate in a genre, rather than belonging to it.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, this understanding also harmonises better with the variations and differences of sentence formation in the research article examples. Specifically, the literary studies texts appear to participate in another genre with contrasting ideals of variability, singularity, and performativity. Thus, the difference of literary studies may indeed indicate the existence of another poetics. Yet despite of their differences, the other disciplines analysed largely share a set of core poetic ideals and hence, participate in the poetics of clarity, but with varying degrees of rigidity.

Rigidity is key because even though a poetic regime cannot *determine* language use, it can *direct* and *regulate* it. Despite Lyotard's praise of openness and emphasis on the possibility of writing differently, to be accepted as knowledge writing may need to follow specific demands. Indeed, as Foucault has argued, in every epoch the norms of acceptability partly determine the forms a statement can have to be taken for knowledge.<sup>27</sup> While a genre of discourse cannot be understood as determining the phrasing of the world in the poetics of clarity, this phrasing is, nonetheless, regulated by an ideal of direct declarative sentences that does not exclude other phrases but limits their space in the discourse. Thus, it operates a centripetal movement towards a master language or *monoglossia* to rephrase it in Bakhtin's terms.<sup>28</sup> This homogenising movement also becomes a delimiting of thinking, because following a cognitive descriptive path reduces the possibility of drawing on other effects of discourse and modes of presentation. If sentence formation is regulated by a genre that excludes other sentence types than the declarative, thinking might be reduced, e.g. because of the exclusion of interrogative and exclamatory sentence types that may play a performative function for reflection and critique (not merely for the writer, but certainly also for the reader).

Yet this less rigid reformulation of genres and poetic regimes still rests on the basic presupposition that phrases are heterogeneous and phrase regimes incommensurable. Yet as Frank has argued, Lyotard assumes an incommensurability between phrase regimes, which depends on clearly demarcated rules belonging to defined genres, which undermines the very idea of incommensurability.<sup>29</sup> For example, when Lyotard resists defining *phrase*, he performatively shows that phrases can have no universal validity, yet, he simultaneously removes the concept of *phrase* from being inscribed in a specific phrase regime. Consequently, Lyotard's non-definition apparently escapes the incommensurability of the phrase regimes it describes, and the presumed incommensurability breaks down.<sup>30</sup> The incommensurability thesis is a crucial component for my critique of the homogenisation of sentences. Thus, if phrase regimes are not incommensurable, it cannot be maintained that they present a universe in different, indeed untranslatable, ways.



Furthermore, according to Frank, the differend can be understood as a communicative contradiction.<sup>31</sup> Yet by demanding that Lyotard explains this communicative contradiction within the framework of consensus theory, Frank enforces a 'Habermasian justice' and denies the differend from the beginning.<sup>32</sup> This Habermasian justice leads to a clash between a belief in a set of universal conditions of communication and a denial of the possibility of a master discourse able to encompass every other discourse. While Frank (and Habermas) embraces the first possibility, Lyotard calls for a justice of multiplicities that denies a common ground for judging discourses. Curiously, however, Frank's reinterpretation of Lyotard's differend within the framework of consensus theory shows that the translation between discourses is no easy matter and performatively contradicts his attempt to argue for the possibility of a common ground. Perhaps Frank's fictive dialogue between Habermas and Lyotard can even be taken as an argument in favour of incommensurability. Yet, Lyotard's insistence on the differend and call for a justice of multiplicities rests on the naturalisation of a fundamental normative field that favours multiplicity, heterogeneity, incommensurability, and difference.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, we find ourselves in an ethico-theoretical threshold between favouring the unity of a commonly shared communicative basis and favouring the multiplicity of possibilities different discourses may grant us. This leads to a *radical indecision*: be plural or be one?<sup>34</sup>

Lyotard would choose the first. Given the dominance of the cognitive descriptive regime within the poetics of clarity, it may be tempting to follow Lyotard's call for new ways of writing characterised by 'a certain way of coming to what is unknown, a patience with the necessity to answer, rejecting the necessity to have results immediately or as soon as possible'.<sup>35</sup> Yet this temptation remains caught within an ethico-theoretical indecidability. The only way to open academic discourse to its other would be silence.<sup>36</sup>

However, silence and undecidability are inconvenient within a discourse with an inherent drive towards conclusions. So we must continue but let us take a leap from the matter of sentence construction to poetic devices, especially metaphors. Since the 1970s, a 'metaphormania' has raged in academia.<sup>37</sup> Thus, I do not pretend to cover this topic in any general matter, and my aim is solely to discuss the tacit banishment of metaphors and reflect on the potential consequences for thinking.

In the poetics of clarity, a general demand of a zero style exists that yields the content in its purity. Day and Gastel push this to extremes when they demand 'absolute clarity in scientific writing'.<sup>38</sup> In their plead for a zero style that (ideally) secures absolute clarity, Day and Gastel deem certain linguistic elements such as metaphors as ornamental devices that divert attention from the content. This demarcation of scientific language from literary devices such as metaphors resonates with their claim that 'a scientific paper is not literature'.<sup>39</sup> This distinction is neither surprising nor provocative, and it resonates with the tacit ideal of banishing poetic devices as a potential enemy of clarity as well as the general reduction of language to its ideational function within the poetics of clarity. Metaphors are generally rejected in academic writing; they are conceived as seducers and foremost exemplars of improper language use threatening the ideal of objective knowledge.<sup>40</sup> Maybe even



‘perfect cheats’ that insinuate wrong ideas.<sup>41</sup> In the border drawn within the poetics of clarity between science and entertainment, the metaphor is reduced to a distracting ornamental device.

However, this (ideal) expulsion of the metaphor is a misrecognition of its function in language, because language is structured metaphorically.<sup>42</sup> Yet, we are largely unaware of it, because metaphors gradually become familiar and literal through our use, which obliterates them as metaphors.<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche has described this gradual obliteration metaphorically as an ‘Egypticism’ in which metaphors are turned into ‘conceptual mummies’.<sup>44</sup> By showing how the fundamental metaphoricality of thought is forgotten, Nietzsche relates philosophy back to life.<sup>45</sup> For Nietzsche, the formation of metaphors is a fundamental human drive that cannot be dispensed with in thought.<sup>46</sup> This view resonates with Gadamer’s description of how we understand the world through a natural process of concept formation based on metaphorical projections of human aspects, needs and interests onto the things we wish to understand.<sup>47</sup> More recently, Lakoff and Johnson have developed a take on the workings of metaphors in their analyses of everyday metaphors.<sup>48</sup> However, the workings of metaphors cannot be delimited to literature, philosophy, and everyday language. In the analysis of sentence formation, we saw how mainly conventional (and in a sense dead) metaphors were used in the research article examples. For example, ‘route’ was used to invoke a familiar meaning of knowledge as a journey. Consequently, as Weingart and Maasen have also pointed out in their analysis of the dynamics of knowledge: no discourse can do without metaphors.<sup>49</sup> From literature, philosophy, and everyday language to scientific language, metaphors are operative albeit in different ways.

One crucial way in which metaphors are operative within the poetics of clarity is to familiarise the unfamiliar. In this way, metaphors can become servants of clarity in the sense of readability. Most metaphors in the text examples act as conventional metaphors invoking a familiar image and establishing a text–reader relationship. Consequently, metaphors can make matters clearer, because of their ability to familiarise. A perhaps paradoxical example of a conventional metaphorical image operative within the poetics of clarity is the very idea of clarity. Clarity is itself a metaphor that plays on a distinction between visibility/invisibility. In the ideal reduction of reading to seeing, clarity is related to a juxtaposition of light, vision, and knowledge. Light gives life not only to plants, animals, humans but also metaphorically to knowledge. Without light, there is no clarity but only vagueness, obscurity, darkness.<sup>50</sup> In this metaphorical projection, thinking is reduced to vision, which depends on the clarity of (preferably eternal) daylight.<sup>51</sup> Hence, the specific way of writing vital for the continued progression of knowledge production is deeply entangled with a metaphor of light. However, this *imperialism of light*, to borrow a formulation from Blanchot, reveals anything but itself.<sup>52</sup> Knowledge production needs the metaphor of clarity to formulate a proper poetics and expel metaphors from its domain. Thus, when linguistic devices such as metaphors are degraded as secondary ornaments, the demand for clarity risks clarity for the sake of clarity!

However, more than merely a pedagogical device in the service of truth, metaphors are crucial for the development of new knowledge. As Orwell, for



example, has pointed out, metaphors can also assist thought in thinking the new: 'a newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image'.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the (ideal) expulsion of metaphors not merely misrecognises the basic metaphoricity of language, but may also risk the future development and progression of knowledge. For example, as Kuhn argues: 'metaphors play an essential role in establishing links between scientific language and the world. Those links, however, are not given once and for all'.<sup>54</sup> Metaphors enable us to understand new aspects of the world, but to progress we may need to draw on new metaphors, rather than relying on tired old metaphors. Likewise, Ricoeur argues that metaphors can explore and illuminate unknown phenomena and new dimensions of reality.<sup>55</sup> What characterises the metaphor is the ability to move beyond and transgress (*meta*).<sup>56</sup> Already Aristotle emphasised the importance of metaphors for the development of knowledge because metaphors can produce new knowledge without being incomprehensible.<sup>57</sup> But as metaphors are reiterated over time, they lose their force.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, metaphors can import new knowledge into a discourse, but when they become familiar, they lose their metaphoric quality.<sup>59</sup> Thus, according to Becker, metaphors must be alive to work, while tired metaphors turn into clichés.<sup>60</sup> Yet as long as metaphors are alive, they inherently risk being misunderstood, because they are not yet tied to a conventional meaning. Aristotle tried to eliminate this ambivalence by specifying the metaphor as a servant of the truth that must familiarise the unfamiliar.<sup>61</sup> Yet the ambivalence remains inherent in the use of metaphors: they are always imperfect and involve the risk of misunderstanding; otherwise, they would no longer be metaphors.<sup>62</sup>

To use metaphors may be risky within a discourse aiming at knowledge. Yet to attempt to expel the metaphor from academic writing appears to be a serious constraint on thinking within academia. When Day and Gastel, for example, express a demand that 'when something is said *for the first time*, clarity is essential',<sup>63</sup> the danger is that nothing new will ever be said. The new may need time to develop through metaphorical appropriations. Or as Bachelard remarks: 'empirical thought is clear *in retrospect*, when the apparatus of reason has been developed'.<sup>64</sup> The already known will always appear clearer, and the demand for absolute clarity imports an element of conservatism into the core of knowledge production. Yet, in the constant struggle for success, researchers will often choose metaphors and analogies from areas, where they have already been successful and, thus, the use of metaphors cannot by itself guard against conservatism.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, a restrictive organisation of knowledge production that (ideally) expels poetic devices such as metaphors potentially limits the development of thinking within academia. Knowledge production needs metaphors to progress, and it cannot be removed from poetic devices that entails the danger of misunderstanding. Thinking must take risks to progress.

## Notes

- 1 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xii/*Le differend*, 10.



- 2 James Williams, *Lyotard. Towards a Postmodern Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1998), 79. See also Lyotard, *Le differend*, 10.
- 3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen, Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Rev. 4th ed (Chichester; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §23–24.
- 4 Lyotard, *Le differend*, 187.
- 5 Fred Evans, 'Lyotard, Bakhtin, and Radical Heterogeneity', in *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 62.
- 6 Jean-Francois Lyotard and Georges Van Den Abbeele, 'Interview: Jean-Francois Lyotard', *Diacritics* 14, no. 3 (1984): 15, 17.
- 7 Lyotard and Van Den Abbeele, 'Interview: Jean-François Lyotard', 17.
- 8 Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard. Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 124.
- 9 Lyotard and Van Den Abbeele, 'Interview: Jean-François Lyotard', 17.
- 10 Georges Van Den Abbeele, 'Glossary of French Terms', in *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute*, by Jean-François Lyotard (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 194.
- 11 Lyotard, *The Differend*, 68/*Le differend* 106.
- 12 David Carroll, *Paraesthetics. Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (New York, NY: Methuen, 1987), 164.
- 13 For Lyotard, no phrase is the first, there are always others preceding it and thus linking between sentences is always already implied (*Le differend*, 198). See also Bennington, *Lyotard*, 134.
- 14 See Lyotard and Van Den Abbeele, 'Interview: Jean-François Lyotard', 17.
- 15 Lyotard, *The Differend*, 84/*Le differend*, 127. Notice here that the French word *régime* is translated with *regimen*. I have chosen to designate it as *phrase regimes* to stay closer to the original French text.
- 16 Evans, 'Lyotard, Bakhtin, and radical heterogeneity', 62.
- 17 Eric White, 'Review: Lyotard's Neo-Sophistic Philosophy of Phrases', *Poetics Today* 15, no. 3 (1994): 479–493, 486.
- 18 Bennington, *Lyotard*, 134.
- 19 Lyotard, *Le differend*, 198.
- 20 Gary A. Olson and Jean-François Lyotard, 'Resisting a Discourse of Mastery: A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard', *JAC* 15, no. 3 (1995): 391–410, 400.
- 21 Olson and Lyotard, 'Resisting a Discourse of Mastery', 400.
- 22 Olson and Lyotard, 'Resisting a Discourse of Mastery', 400.
- 23 See also Daniel Punday, *Narrative after Deconstruction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 7.
- 24 I have borrowed the expression the *tyranny of genre* from Coe (see 'An Arousing and Fulfilment of Desires', 188).
- 25 White, 'Review: Lyotard's Neo-Sophistic Philosophy of Phrases', 489.
- 26 See e.g. David Duff, *Modern Genre Theory* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 4; Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 55–81, 65.
- 27 Béatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project. Between the Transcendental and the Historical* (Stanford, CT: Stanford University Press, 2002), 83.
- 28 Evans, 'Lyotard, Bakhtin, and radical heterogeneity', 66.
- 29 See Williams, *Lyotard*, 137.
- 30 See Williams, *Lyotard*, 137, for a similar problem.
- 31 Erik Vogt, 'Lyotard, Frank, and the Limits of Understanding', in *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 114.
- 32 Vogt, 'Lyotard, Frank, and the Limits of Understanding', 115.
- 33 Rockhill, *Interventions in Contemporary Thought*, 119–120.
- 34 Geoffrey Bennington, 'Derrida', in *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, ed. Simon Critchley and William R. Schroeder, Reprinted (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 556; and Evans, 'Lyotard, Bakhtin, and Radical Heterogeneity', 64.



- 35 Olson and Lyotard, 'Resisting a Discourse of Mastery', 407.
- 36 Here I am inspired by Rockhill's discussion of the philosophy of difference and the ability for philosophy to truly open up to alterity (see Rockhill, *Interventions in Contemporary Thought*, 132).
- 37 Sabine Maasen, 'Who Is Afraid of Metaphors?', in *Biology as Society, Society as Biology: Metaphors*, ed. Sabine Maasen, Everett Mendelsohn, and Peter Weingart (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1995), 11–35, 11.
- 38 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 4.
- 39 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 22.
- 40 Maasen and Weingart, *Metaphors and the Dynamics of Knowledge*, 2–3.
- 41 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Printed for S. Birt, D. Browne, T and T. Longman, J. Schuckburgh, C. Hitch and L. Hawes, J. Hodges, J. Oswald, A. Millar, J. Beecroft, J. and J. Rivington, J. Ward, and M. Cooper, 1753), 106.
- 42 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode, Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960), 407.
- 43 G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, vol. 13, Werke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp taschenbuch, 1970), 518.
- 44 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Götzen-Dämmerung oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophirt', in *Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari, vol. VI.3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1969), 'Die "Vernunft" in der Philosophie', § 1.
- 45 Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche et la métaphore* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1983), 181.
- 46 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne*, vol. 2, Klassiker-Ausgabe (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1921), §2.
- 47 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 412.
- 48 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 56.
- 49 Maasen and Weingart, *Metaphors and the Dynamics of Knowledge*, 3.
- 50 See also Jacques Derrida, 'La mythologie blanche', in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1972), 307.
- 51 Derrida, 'La mythologie blanche', 303.
- 52 Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 243–244.
- 53 George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', in *Why I Write* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005), 105.
- 54 Thomas S. Kuhn, 'Metaphor in Science', in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony, 2nd ed. (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 533–542, 539.
- 55 See also Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, 370.
- 56 Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, 366.
- 57 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1410b. See also Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1459a.
- 58 Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists*, 87.
- 59 Maasen and Weingart, *Metaphors and the Dynamics of Knowledge*, 149.
- 60 Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists*, 86.
- 61 Derrida, 'La mythologie blanche', 282, 295.
- 62 Derrida, 'La mythologie blanche', 299.
- 63 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 4.
- 64 Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind* (Manchester: Clinamen Press Ltd., 2002), 24/*La formation de l'esprit scientifique* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. VRIN, 1975), 13.
- 65 Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge*, 59–60.



## 7 Authorial effacement and the suppression of contexts, biases, interests

The purity that the poetics of clarity demands of writing does not merely concern the expulsion of poetic devices such as metaphors, but also the effacement of authorial presence. In this chapter, I wish to explore the potential consequences of this poetics of authorial effacement. As I will argue, authorial effacement inscribes a specific relationship with the objects of knowledge, which (ideally) reduces authorial presence to a zero degree. Within this expository mode of communication, the findings, results, and conclusions appear independent of the authors. Thereby, an ideal of neutrality is inscribed in the authorial position, which must secure the transparency of the object of knowledge. While this ideal creates an appearance of objectivity, I will argue that it is more than a mere textual phenomenon and that it consequently leaves out something important for knowledge production: contexts, biases, and interests are left outside not only from the texts but also from reflection.

Historically, rather than being a stable entity, authorial presence and its functions has fluctuated in scientific writing. In early scientific writing, the truth-value of a text hinged upon the authors connected to specific psychological attributes related to their social position.<sup>1</sup> It presupposed a ‘correct employment of reason’ characterised by an absence of passion and self-interest.<sup>2</sup> Yet according to Foucault, a change in the function of the author in scientific writing occurred in the seventeenth century, when the author began its demise as an index for the truth-value.<sup>3</sup> However, this understanding must be nuanced, because in the first issues of the *Philosophical Transactions* from 1665 multiple different author functions were operative. Moreover, in the *Philosophical Transactions*, the author function becomes stabilised around 1675 as an index for the truth-value, which actually points in the opposite direction of the demise Foucault describes.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the demise of the author as an authority in scientific writing is a more recent development. Indeed, as Atkinson shows, the change from an author-centred to an object-centred scientific writing occurs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> With this transformation, scientific texts grow more informational and impersonal. Along with this change to an object-centred orientation follows a displacement of authority. In this displacement, the contours of the poetics of authorial effacement appear.

The poetics of authorial effacement is characterised by a separation of the object of knowledge from the author(s), almost as if the world speaks or the object



under scrutiny mysteriously inscribes its own signature. This phenomenon creates a *referential illusion* in which the referent appears to speak for itself.<sup>6</sup> Latour and Woolgar describe this impression of an objective reality presenting itself without mediation in the context of the laboratory where the goal is to present facts as flowing directly from the source of original substances without any modalities, qualifications, nor traces of authorial subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> The separation of the objects of knowledge from knowledge producers entails a demand of the knowing subjects to be detached and self-controlled in their acquiring of knowledge leaving the objects of knowledge untouched and uncontaminated. Indeed, this self-control entails knowing subjects actively willing their own passivity.<sup>8</sup> The poetics of authorial effacement indicates that absence of subjectivity is an integral part of the ideal of thinking. This suppression resonates with Sloterdijk's description of the idea of the thinking person as in a certain sense dead.<sup>9</sup> In the poetics of authorial effacement, the thinker must stay dead for the sake of the uncontaminated clarity of the substance and the sustained vitality of knowledge production. Thus, the historical ideals of the absence of passion and self-interest in the correct employment of reason are preserved within the poetics of clarity, while textual authority is removed from the position of the author. But what happens to thinking if the thinker must be dead? Or rather, what implications does this specific demarcation of the position of the knowing subject as an *objective person* have for knowledge production?

The idea of the objective person as a practical embodiment of impersonal reason has provided the West with one of our most vital stories.<sup>10</sup> This ideal resonates with the *ethos of science* described by Merton as impersonal, disinterested, open communication, which suspends judgements until facts are at hand.<sup>11</sup> According to Merton, science comprises a cultural structure with values and norms binding on researchers' actions and legitimising scientific work.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the normative structure of science is the most fundamental constraint on scientific practice.<sup>13</sup> Even though Merton also stresses the inherent tensions and conflicting norms in scientists' ideologies, Mertonian sociology of science privileges a monolithic conception of the scientific community with a common set of norms.<sup>14</sup> Against Merton, Bourdieu among others has argued that a homogeneous scientific community with a commonly accepted system of values and norms does not exist.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as I have shown, the poetics of clarity is not a homogenous unity, but a field of tension constituted by different (and at times antagonistic) poetic ideals. Yet even though no homogenous scientific community exists with commonly accepted norms, there may be certain ideals distributed across disciplinary borders and the poetics of authorial effacement exemplifies such a trans-disciplinary ideal. Such trans-disciplinary ideals work within a community of committed members that are tied together perhaps through what Fleck calls a *thought-style*, which constrains thinking and enables a readiness for directed perception and acting suitably.<sup>16</sup> Maybe then, the particular position of the knowing subject indicated by (and perhaps imposed by) the poetics of authorial effacement may direct the scientists' actions and perceptions.

Yet this understanding needs to be nuanced by important micro-sociological insights. In her study of the processes of construction of scientific facts,



Knorr-Cetina proposes that 'the scientific paper hides more than it tells on its tame and civilised surface'.<sup>17</sup> According to Knorr-Cetina, if we focus solely on journal publications, we only see a de-contextualised version of the production of scientific facts, where contingency and context have disappeared.<sup>18</sup> This de-contextualisation weakens the link between the laboratory and the written text. Likewise, Gilbert and Mulkay have described a difference between the formal paper characterised by an appearance of objectivity and necessity, and informal talk characterised by openness, contingency, and personal interests.<sup>19</sup> This difference between repertoires can also be understood in terms of what Gieryn has called 'boundary-work', through which scientists attempt to attribute selected qualities to their work to establish epistemic authority.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, a tension in the production of scientific publications between the local contextual character of scientific results and the ideal of non-local universality found in formal papers is illuminated.<sup>21</sup> These insights suggest that the death of the researchers-in-the-texts does not provide an adequate image of the production of knowledge. Thus, the poetics of authorial effacement cannot be understood simply as indicating the directions of actions and perceptions.

Perhaps then, the thinker is merely effaced textually for the sake of clarity. By omitting descriptions of authorial subjectivity and contexts, the substance of the research appears more directly and clearly. Indeed, as Merton also points out in a later text, the etiquette of scientific writing entails a vast expurgation of the complex events and behaviours leading to the results in the presentation of the cognitive substance.<sup>22</sup> Yet as a consequence, clarity becomes a selective clarity that may enable the uncovering of 'the substantial' (e.g. results, arguments, conclusions), but on an opaque background. Authorial effacement entails an import not only of a dichotomy between knower/known but also a suppression of contingent contextual factors as well as biases and interests that are effaced in the de-contextualisation processes. This effacement may contribute to the imagery of the 'scientists moving coolly, methodologically, and unerringly to the results they report'.<sup>23</sup> But if the scientific paper hides more than it tells especially of the context of production as well as biases and interests, then it becomes a misrepresentation of knowledge production. For example, as Gadamer has argued, reason always depends on the concrete context.<sup>24</sup> This point runs parallel with crucial insights from the sociology of knowledge, which stresses that knowing is always situated.<sup>25</sup> Within the poetics of authorial effacement, the omission of biases, interests, and contexts potentially distorts knowledge production for the sake of an ideal resembling divine knowledge.

Now if we conceive of the poetics of authorial effacement as a front-stage face-making process, the distortion may secure legitimacy and an appearance of objectivity. For example, as Bourdieu also recognises, style is not an arbitrary attribute of a discourse, but a means through which a discourse can declare itself authorised.<sup>26</sup> The distortion rhetorically emphasises selected attributes of scientific work and marks the boundaries to other discourses, thereby potentially enlarging the material and symbolic resources of science and securing its autonomy.<sup>27</sup> But consequently, it posits an arrogant rationality that promises more than it can perform.<sup>28</sup> According to Gadamer, modern science is characterised



by an exclusion of ‘all that which actually eludes its own methodology and procedures’.<sup>29</sup> For Gadamer, through this refusal, science proves to itself that it is limitless and gives an appearance of total knowledge.<sup>30</sup> Yet this claim must be nuanced because as Gilbert and Mulkay, for example, have shown, informal talk in the laboratory is characterised by an awareness of contingent contextual factors and personal interests. Thus, scientists do not necessarily believe in the ideals of total or divine knowledge. Nonetheless, according to Gilbert and Mulkay, when scientists formulate their own claims about the world, they translate their experiences into an impersonal description appearing to have privileged access to the world, thereby giving the impression that their voice and the world are one.<sup>31</sup> In the poetics of authorial effacement, the allegedly direct and unmediated presentation constitutes legitimacy, authority and an appearance of objectivity. Here precisely the *appearance* of knowledge becomes crucial because the selective clarity characteristic of research articles may constitute an appearance of objectivity through the effacement of factors that may weaken its claims.

However, the poetics of authorial effacement is more than a textual phenomenon constituting an appearance of objectivity. For example, Gilbert and Mulkay have also shown that formal descriptions without contingency and subjectivity are not merely part of an external myth-making process, because they also act as an important resource in informal descriptions of scientific work.<sup>32</sup> Thus, even though the poetics of authorial effacement is a central part of the formal presentation of knowledge within the poetics of clarity, it is not completely removed from scientific practices. This is important because in Knorr-Cetina’s focus on the differences between the formal paper and the laboratory context, she distinguishes (perhaps too) sharply between formal scientific discourse and activities in the laboratory. Hence, I believe it is also possible to conceive the poetics of authorial effacement as more than a mere textual phenomenon tied to the formal presentation. What I want to propose here, however, is not that the ideals of neutrality and impersonality indicated by the poetics of authorial effacement direct the actions of researchers, but they may inscribe a specific stance of the knowing subject in relation to the objects of knowledge characterised by distance and independence. In this specific constellation, crucial parts of knowledge production such as biases, interests, and contexts may remain unthought. While I have already briefly discussed the importance of the context for knowledge production, I will now turn to biases and interests.

In academic work, researchers often share a set of basic assumptions including biases and interests that are largely invisible and remain unquestioned.<sup>33</sup> Yet as long as biases and interests remain unthought, they may constitute what Bourdieu has designated as an *epistemic doxa*, which consists of presuppositions for thoughts, social conditions of possibility, and unconscious dispositions.<sup>34</sup> However, it is crucial to distinguish between different kinds of biases and interests. In the analysis of authorial positioning, some guidelines emphasise the importance of explicating conflicts of interest (e.g. financial). Hence, to argue that biases and interests are left unthought may seem implausible. Undoubtedly, conflicts of interests are highly problematic for the production of knowledge.



Yet, the kinds of biases and interests I refer to concern another level, namely methodological, epistemological, and ontological biases and knowledge guiding interests. Such biases and interests are inherently operative in our understanding of the world, without them, we could not understand it at all.<sup>35</sup>

According to Taylor, 'scientific practice is organised by particular interests: personal, cognitive, technical, professional, and so on'.<sup>36</sup> For example, as Habermas has argued, knowledge guiding interests shape the situations of inquiry in which data are collected, and knowledge without interest is impossible.<sup>37</sup> In his outline of the relationship between knowledge and interests, Habermas distinguishes between empirical-analytical sciences with a technical-cognitive interest, historical-hermeneutic sciences with a practical interest, and critically oriented sciences with an emancipatory interest.<sup>38</sup> While it is possible to challenge Habermas' division and speculative basis for the link between knowledge and interests, his thoughts provide an understanding of what may be excluded from the poetics of clarity.<sup>39</sup> The combination of an ideal of a neutral declarative use of language and the effacement of personal traits within the poetics of clarity potentially privileges the technical-cognitive interests mainly characteristic of the natural sciences.

Similar to Habermas' knowledge guiding interests, biases can be understood as generative resources that (more or less) tacitly imports presuppositions into the core of knowledge production. For example, Longino rejects the idea of value-free science and describes the dynamic interaction between scientific practices and values.<sup>40</sup> In her view, biases are not something held by individual people, but by communities of scientists.<sup>41</sup> However, this entails neither that knowledge production must allow personal biases nor that everything goes. Rather, biases are collectively shared, and often tacitly part of research. Knowledge is always shaped and limited by social, historical, and geographical location as well as viewpoint and specific knowledge production practices.<sup>42</sup> According to Longino, biases are not necessarily bad, because they can drive forward a particular way of thinking and limit alternatives in a highly productive fashion.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, biases are epistemic resources that make knowledge possible.<sup>44</sup> Yet, to claim that biases are epistemic resources entails more than just that biases are always already at work in knowledge production. It entails the recognition that different biases may be productive for knowledge production by opening a variety of different and legitimate perspectives on the world, which is always richer than what can be treated within a single methodological or theoretical perspective.<sup>45</sup> It can even be claimed that nothing in the physical world exists, which uniquely determines scientists' conclusions.<sup>46</sup> Against zero-sum epistemologies in which only one theory can be correct, Longino argues that multiple practices can produce knowledge of the same phenomenon and different knowers situated and motivated by different cognitive goals may have different non-reconcilable knowledge of the same phenomenon.<sup>47</sup> Thus, in Feyerabend's words: 'proliferation of theories is beneficial for science, while uniformity impairs its critical power'.<sup>48</sup>

Even though the specific connection between the knowing subject and the object of scrutiny within the poetics of authorial effacement may enable a productive way of revealing the world, other productive perspectives may



be limited, constrained, or expelled. While convergent thinking may increase efficiency, selective clarity entails a danger of privileging particular biases and interests, while others may be repressed. This privileging of an epistemic doxa is further amplified in the publication process by the position of a few editors whose biases and interests may influence the selection process.<sup>49</sup> If the epistemic doxa with its biases and interests are always part of the production of knowledge, rather than leaving them unthought, we must explicate them to mark the perspective from where knowledge is produced and make sure certain collectively shared biases and interests do not dominate across fields of research. Otherwise, we risk marginalising alternate biases that may be fruitful for the generation of new concepts, methods as well as in the demarcation of other aspects of the world through new questions.<sup>50</sup> As Callon also argues: ‘science is a public good, which must be preserved at all costs because it is a source of variety. It causes new states of the world to proliferate. And this diversity depends on the diversity of interests and projects’.<sup>51</sup> Precisely because biases and interests are not something we can completely expel from research practices, it is crucial to reflect on them and support their multiplication. Otherwise, the important productive dimension of biases and interests may be obscured.

When the authorial positioning in the poetics of clarity is subjected to a movement of effacement and reduced to a zero degree, clarity becomes selective. A selective clarity that may reveal specific findings, but also conceals the contingent context of production. Within this textual system of production, clarity co-produces opaqueness. Perhaps, then, I can claim, following the lines of Nietzsche’s critique of the idealists, that knowledge producers within the poetics of clarity create veils (‘Alles blasse Schleiermacher’) and that they will never enjoy the honour of being the first honest thinkers in history.<sup>52</sup> Clarity not only uncovers but also covers up, because there is no neutral language (not even the zero style), nor impersonal perspective (not even the apparently dead, knowing subject) from where the unveiling can occur. ‘Everyone thinks, but always as some-one, rather than as any-one or no-one’.<sup>53</sup> Or as Haraway argues: ‘objectivity is not about disengagement but about mutual *and* usually unequal structuring’.<sup>54</sup> But is it possible to conceive of an honest future for thinking where thinkers are no longer preferred to be kind of dead?

Perhaps this transformation has already begun as the antagonistic poetic ideals pertaining to authorial positioning in the poetics of clarity might suggest. The unstable position of the author could indicate that a possible transformation is underway in which the knowing subject can establish a new relationship with knowledge. However, to expect that the change of authorial positioning will entail a transformation is questionable because this transformation requires more than a mere multiplication of first-person pronouns in the texts. It requires that biases, interests, and contextual circumstances enter the texts reflexively. Otherwise, we risk that specific biases and interests remain privileged in the production of knowledge. In the historical confrontation with the author, we may have lost our critical reflection on how authors and researchers are significant for texts and their knowledge claims. While authorial authority must remain *denounced*, reflexivity



must become *pronounced*. Thus, here I am not arguing for a return to the concept of the author as authority characteristic of earlier scientific writing, but rather the entrance of reflections on biases, interests, and contexts into the core research processes. This call for reflexivity does not entail, however, the privileging of a specific reflexivity nor particular methodological and theoretical biases and interests.<sup>55</sup> Rather as long as different research programmes produce empirical or theoretical successes without clear error or dogmatic reasoning, they can be conceived as epistemic resources.<sup>56</sup>

When the poetics of authorial effacement turns clarity into a selective clarity that must conform with demands of neutrality and impersonality, it may be highly prolific for knowledge production. Yet not only does this selective clarity render the background of knowledge obscure, but it risks the progression of knowledge production by excluding potential epistemic resources such as alternate biases and interests that may open different fields of exploration and questions to pursue.

## Notes

- 1 See e.g. Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), for more on this.
- 2 Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science*, 7–8.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *L'ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 29.
- 4 See also Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge*, Chapter 3; Atkinson, *Scientific Discourse in Sociohistorical Context*, 21.
- 5 Atkinson, *Scientific Discourse in Sociohistorical Context*, xxviii.
- 6 Roland Barthes, 'Le discours de l'histoire', in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), 158.
- 7 Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 81–82.
- 8 Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2010), 246.
- 9 Sloterdijk, *Scheintod im Denken*, 11.
- 10 E. Doyle McCarthy, *Knowledge as Culture. The New Sociology of Knowledge* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 86.
- 11 Robert K. Merton, 'The Normative Structure of Science', in *The Sociology of the Sciences*, ed. Helga Nowotny and Klaus Taschwer, vol. 1 (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1957), 41–48.
- 12 Merton, 'The Normative Structure of Science', 39.
- 13 See Charles Alan Taylor, *Defining science: A rhetoric of demarcation* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 62.
- 14 Thomas F. Gieryn, 'Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists'. *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6 (December 1983): 781–795, 792. See also Taylor, *Defining science*, 60.
- 15 Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Peculiar History of Scientific Reason', in *The Sociology of the Sciences*, ed. Helga Nowotny and Klaus Taschwer, vol. 1 (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1991), 124.
- 16 Stig Brorson and Hanne Andersen, 'Stabilizing and Changing Phenomenal Worlds: Ludwik Fleck and Thomas Kuhn on Scientific Literature', *Journal for General Philosophy of Science* 32 (2001): 109–129, 114.
- 17 Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge*, 94.



- 18 Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge*, 47.
- 19 G.N. Gilbert and M. Mulkay, *Opening Pandora's Box. A Sociological Analysis of Scientist's Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 46, 47, 61.
- 20 Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, 'The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences'. *Annual Review of Sociology* 28, no. 1 (August 2002): 167–195, 178–179.
- 21 See also Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge*, 133.
- 22 Robert K. Merton, 'Behavior Patterns of Scientists', in *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, ed. Norman W. Storer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 325–342, 326.
- 23 Merton, 'Behavior Patterns of Scientists', 326.
- 24 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 260.
- 25 McCarthy, *Knowledge as Culture*, 108, 111.
- 26 Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire*, 193.
- 27 Gieryn, 'Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science', 782.
- 28 Not unlike the arrogant rationality characteristic of scientific sociology described by Lepenies (see *Between Literature and Science*, 14).
- 29 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 93.
- 30 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 260.
- 31 Gilbert and Mulkay, *Opening Pandora's Box*, 89.
- 32 Gilbert and Mulkay, *Opening Pandora's Box*, 61.
- 33 For example, according to Fleck, the work of scientist's is characterised by a set of shared assumptions or a 'thought style' (see Jonathan Harwood, 'Ludwik Fleck and the Sociology of Knowledge'. *Social Studies of Science* 16 (1986), 173–187, 177).
- 34 Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Scholastic Point of View', trans. Loïc J.D. Wacquant (*Geschmack, Strategien, praktiker Sinn*, Freie Universität, Berlin, 1989), 381.
- 35 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 260–262.
- 36 See Taylor, *Defining science*, 222.
- 37 Roger S. Gottlieb, 'Review: The Contemporary Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas. Reviewed Work(s): Knowledge and Human Interests by; Theory and Practice by; Legitimation Crisis by; Communication and the Evolution of Society by Jürgen Habermas', *Ethics* 91, no. 2 (1981): 280–295, 281–282.
- 38 Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), 308–310.
- 39 Fred Dallmayr, 'Critical Theory Criticized: Habermas' *Knowledge and Human Interests* and Its Aftermath', *Philosophy of Social Sciences* 2 (1972): 211–229.
- 40 Helen E. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5.
- 41 Sarah S. Richardson, 'Feminist Philosophy of Science: History, Contributions, and Challenges', *Synthese* 177, no. 3 (December 2010): 337–362, 355.
- 42 Helen E. Longino, *The Fate of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 207.
- 43 Richardson, 'Feminist Philosophy of Science', 355.
- 44 See Elizabeth Anderson, 'Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science', ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015).
- 45 As Gadamer for example points out in the beginning of *Wahrheit und Methode*, no methodological perspective can ever be sufficient for the disclosure of truth (xiii–xiv). A similar point has been made within postmodern feminist epistemology, which opposes universalising discourses and promotes the value of multiple voices (McCarthy, *Knowledge as Culture*, 102).
- 46 M. J. Mulkay, *Science and the Sociology of Knowledge*. (London; Boston, MA: G. Allen & Unwin, 1979), 119.
- 47 Longino, *The Fate of Knowledge*, 207, 213.



- 48 Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1993), 24.
- 49 See Young, Ioannidis, and Al-Ubaydli, 'Why Current Publication Practices May Distort Science', 6, 10.
- 50 See Anderson, 'Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science'.
- 51 Michel Callon, 'Is Science a Public Good?' *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 19 (1993), 417.
- 52 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. VI.3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1969), 'Der Fall Wagner', § 3.
- 53 Hallward, 'Jacques Rancière and the Subversion of Mastery', 40.
- 54 Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988), 595–596.
- 55 See Michael Lynch, 'Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge', *Theory, Culture & Society* 17, no. 3 (1 June 2000): 26–54, for an interesting discussion of reflexivity in its diverse guises.
- 56 See Anderson, 'Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science'.



## 8 Textual structures as templates for thinking

So far, I have discussed how the aim to secure the vitality and progression of knowledge production through specific demands of language use and authorial positioning may end up delimiting thinking within academia. In this chapter, I will continue exploring the question concerning the consequences for thinking, but specifically at the level of textual organisation. The IMRAD structure appeared as the most rigidly enforced and prevalent textual organisation in my analysis. In the following, I begin by discussing this compositional structure before I broaden the discussion to concern the trans-disciplinary ideals of textual atomism and logical succession of one main argument. I will specifically discuss how structural demands create templates for thinking that may privilege specific parts of academic work while leaving out substantial parts such as errors and repressing multi-dimensional thinking.

Let us begin by looking at the ideal of IMRAD as a textual organisation. Historically, the IMRAD structure was developed in the second half of the nineteenth century when the advancement of science led to increased investment in research and an accelerated production of scientific papers.<sup>1</sup> Within this accelerated production of knowledge and the demand for researchers to keep up with current research emerged a need for a uniform system of textual organisation that could guide researchers through the texts.<sup>2</sup> In this way, the development of IMRAD can be seen as crucial for the vitality of knowledge production, because it aims at securing that texts are easily accessible through standardisation. Especially, after the prescription of IMRAD as a standard in 1972 by the *American National Standards Institute*, the tendency to uniformity increased.<sup>3</sup> According to Day and Gastel, the IMRAD structure ‘is so eminently logical that, increasingly, it is used for many other types of expository writing’.<sup>4</sup> As I have shown in my analysis, the IMRAD structure is prevalent within the natural sciences, particularly in neuroscience and medical journals as well as in high-impact sociology journals. This prevalence across imagined disciplinary borders is supported by a powerful narrative that naturalises IMRAD as not merely the most economical and readable way to present research, but as a reflection of the process of scientific work. Within this powerful narrative, IMRAD is conceived as a structure imposed from the actual research practices, rather than as an artificial textual structure: IMRAD imposes itself because it mirrors the process of discovery.



*How remarkably everything fits together: the textual structure of scientific articles mirrors the actual practices of researchers, and as a happy coincidence this textual structure also yields the clearest way to present research!*

However, if we break out of this illusive enchanted world where everything fits together, a different image emerges. For example, Medawar argues that the scientific paper misrepresents the thought processes behind it. According to Medawar, the scientific paper incarnates a mistaken understanding of knowledge production as inductively gathering evidence from the senses through naïve uncontaminated observation.<sup>5</sup> The IMRAD structure incarnates this understanding because results are separated from the discussion as if they were received directly from the world.<sup>6</sup> As I have shown in my analysis, within IMRAD, but also in the alternative IRDAM structure, the discussion is always placed after the results. By placing the discussion independently, methods and results appear to be beyond discussion bestowing the methods and results with a sense of necessity, validity, and objectivity, whereas the discussion plays a more interpretative role. Meanwhile, the placement of the methods section may indicate two different ways of legitimisation: in IMRAD, by placing the methods before the results, the structure marks a close linkage between methods and results, and the methods can legitimise the results; in IRDAM, by placing the methods in the end, the independence of the results is accentuated and a strong claim of objectivity is inscribed. Regardless of these differences, according to Medawar, when the discussion is placed after the results in research articles, it creates a misleading narrative. In his view, the discussion should figure in the beginning because scientific work always commences with an expectation of results and involves choices of methods: scientists must confess that their hypotheses are ideas that emerge through inspiration rather than logic.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, in the scientific paper, a tension between problem and solution is built up, which stands in sharp contrast to the multiple interests present in the laboratory.<sup>8</sup> This composition of a narrative moving from problem to solution through logical progression has been described by Day and Gastel as appropriate for most (descriptive) scientific papers.<sup>9</sup> But as Knorr-Cetina argues, in the formal paper a reversal of the relationship between problem and solution occurs: while the researchers in the laboratory reacted to arbitrary possibilities for success, in the formal paper the work processes are presented as based on a specific problem.<sup>10</sup> Thereby, a double movement of de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation occurs in the scientific paper, which conceals the contingent and contextual idiosyncrasies, and places the research among other research projects.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it conceals *the serendipity principle*, i.e. ‘the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident’.<sup>12</sup> This points to the problematic in assuming that science works within a problem-solving mode of thought, which is easily taken for granted if one takes formal scientific papers as testimonies of scientific work processes. Yet this does not entail that the scientific paper should correspond to the processes of discovery.<sup>13</sup> In his critique, Medawar shares a common presupposition with the naturalisation of IMRAD, namely that the structure of the scientific paper is supposed to mirror the research processes. But as Latour and Woolgar



rightly argue, there is no reason why scientific papers should directly reflect the activities in the laboratory.<sup>14</sup> Rather, we must abandon this idea of mirroring.

The naturalisation of IMRAD as a mirroring of research processes must be firmly rejected as nothing more than an idealised front-stage presentation. But precisely as a front-stage phenomenon, the myth of mirroring is crucial for the impression of a zero style that presents the research as unmediated. The myth of mirroring hides the act of composition as a persuasive part of scientific work: if everybody organises the text in the same way, composition can have no effect as a rhetorical tool of persuasion. *Everybody is equal; nobody is a writer!* When the textual organisation of knowledge is established before the process of writing, writing is reduced to the process of filling in a form. For example, some guidelines even specify the content and the number of words appropriate for each section.<sup>15</sup> But precisely the apparent neutrality of the organisation of written knowledge entails that the composition accentuates a sense of objectivity because every trace of rhetorical persuasion has disappeared. As Gross argues, the arrangement of a paper plays an important role in giving the impression of an unproblematic move from the laboratory setting to natural processes, and thereby functions as enactments of the ideological norm.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the arrangement of a paper within a specific form is so important that if a paper does not follow formal rules, it risks remaining unpublished or at least appearing unbelievable. These powerful incentives promote compliance.<sup>17</sup>

Rather than a mirroring of research practices, IMRAD functions as a standardised way of establishing believable points. Nonetheless, an inherent danger in this standardisation of the organization of knowledge exists: when writing is turned into a process of filling in a form, this organisation may also structure thinking. As Sword, for example, has claimed: 'academics who always plan, research, and write to a template risk thinking to a template as well'.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, she does not elaborate on the consequences of thinking to a template. I believe the risk of thinking to a template does not entail that the research process becomes a reflection of a preconceived structure (such as IMRAD). Rather, as Strunk and White point out: 'the act of composition, or creation, disciplines the mind; writing is one way to go about thinking, and the practice and habit of writing not only drain the mind but supply it too'.<sup>19</sup> This entails that if composition is predetermined, it may discipline thinking into working within specific patterns or templates. Indeed, a given poetics may produce effects in reality by providing models for thought.<sup>20</sup>

Let us for a moment dwell on this idea of thinking to a template. If specific templates such as IMRAD standardise the core elements of scientific papers, they may influence what researchers focus on. A predetermined compositional structure may constitute a plotline of prefabricated components that command our attention.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, as Heidegger poetically expresses it, man 'is always thrown back on the paths that he himself has laid out: he becomes mired in his paths, caught in the beaten track'.<sup>22</sup> We are not compelled to follow such paths but rather 'thrown back' on them. This sense of being 'thrown back' connects nicely with Wittgenstein's description of rule-following with the similar metaphor of a 'garden path'. For Wittgenstein, a rule is 'like a garden path in which you are trained



to walk, and which is convenient'.<sup>23</sup> With training the garden path becomes one of the paths you walk – the path pulls you.<sup>24</sup> It becomes habitual, something we follow without being compelled to do so, something we just do as if it was completely natural. Likewise, specific ways of researching may become habitual thinking patterns. Drawing on Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's descriptions of paths, thinking can be understood as largely habitual: thoughts run in established routines. Thoughts pass automatically according to techniques we have learned comparable to a garden path we are trained to walk: we don't think about finding our way, we just follow it. IMRAD may very well function akin to a garden path that conveniently leads researchers through the publication process. However, sometimes this path is not the only way through the garden. Indeed, there may be other parts of the garden worth exploring maybe even vast woodlands surrounding the garden, with their dark yet sometimes open pathways to curiosity. Such 'woodland paths might lose us, induce us to wander without knowing where we are, it being one possible path among many'.<sup>25</sup> Thus, thinking to a template may provide us with a secure path to publication, yet leave the vast woodlands surrounding us unexplored.

Within the accelerated production of knowledge, a standardised structure such as IMRAD may aid researchers both in their reading of other texts and in providing a readymade reporting system, but it also entails the danger of omitting important elements. Or to follow Ingold's parallel between wayfaring and travelling: while drawing a line in freehand parallels wayfaring, in which you have to keep an eye on where you are going and adjust accordingly, drawing a line with a ruler parallels transport where the route has already been plotted and can be travelled efficiently and securely.<sup>26</sup> A standardised structure such as IMRAD may constitute an efficient medium of transport for scientific findings to travel the globe. Indeed, standardisation may help to construct uniformities across cultures, time, and geography.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, by cutting down the number of options, standards may simplify life and allow for greater complexity within the options.<sup>28</sup> Yet a crucial part of standardisation is that, while standards do not lead to a uniform world, they transform the world, because every standard elevates some values or things at the expense of others: standardisation can also become a weapon of exclusion.<sup>29</sup> Following Feyerabend, it can be argued that a law-and-order framework such as IMRAD is less likely to encourage scientific progress because the world is largely unknown and we must keep our options open, rather than restricting our exploration in advance.<sup>30</sup> The compositional structure must not predetermine what parts of research are significant and what parts are excluded or subordinated because it risks obscuring important parts of research that do not have a specifically designated spot. Thus, the compositional structure must remain flexible and allow elements that do not fit within the standard form – it must allow the imposition from the research.

Even though there has been a tendency to uniformity, since the establishment of IMRAD as a standard, my analysis of the poetics of clarity also indicates that variations of the IMRAD structure exist, as well as alternatives (IRDAM and 'I . . . C'). Yet, the IMRAD structure also functions as a structural ideal



within particularly high-impact sociology journals, which could indicate what Bourdieu has described as a tendency to mimic the natural sciences to create an appearance of authority.<sup>31</sup> However, it is crucial to remember the deep rift within sociology as a third culture residing between a scientific orientation and a hermeneutic attitude.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in sociology, the compositional structure takes on a much more flexible hybrid form that might give an impression of similarity, but also allows for a larger variety of sections. This flexibility is also characteristic of the journals subscribing to IRDAM and particularly accentuated in journals from the humanities that only (occasionally) vaguely determine the ideal structure as 'I . . . C'. Consequently, my discussion of the IMRAD structure mainly concerns neuroscience and medicine (and extends to some sociology articles). But to the extent that the increasing standardisation continues these problems may also emerge on a larger scale.

However, we must also recall the basic compositional demands shared by most disciplines, namely the composition of one main argument with a teleological progression from problem to solution developed through a combination of textual atomism and logical succession. As I have already briefly touched upon, from the viewpoint of Lyotard's conception of genres, most texts share a common teleology that inscribes them in a demand for progressing from introduction to conclusion through reporting, explicating, and arguing. In my analysis, I have shown how the disciplines diverge in terms of the degrees of atomism and succession embodied in the texts. Nonetheless, they largely share a structural ideal that governs the organisation of arguments and findings into sequences of division and succession in a teleological movement towards a solution or conclusion. For example, I have shown how multiple-part papers are discouraged. This demand pertaining to the presentation of the argument inscribes knowledge production within a linear template that can be directly linked with the ideals of readability and textual economy. While this template may enhance readability, and allow for a swift consumption of texts, it may end up delimiting the story to be told.

The inscription of knowledge production within a template of linearity may threaten the possibility of a multifaceted thinking within academia. According to Derrida, a concept of linearity functions as a model for the organisation of the world and language.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, he sees linear writing as constituting the instrument of analysis out of which grew philosophy and science. This model of linearity is related to a conception of temporality as homogeneous, continuous, straight.<sup>34</sup> But conceiving temporality within this model of linearity renders temporal movement spatial and treats it as an accumulation that moves towards an end and refers to a telos.<sup>35</sup> The man of reason walks in a straight line and 'as he walks, so he thinks, proceeding without hesitation or deviation from point to point'.<sup>36</sup> In this way, he thinks 'straight'. According to Ingold, a sense of 'straightness' is prevalent in Western culture and associated with mind against matter, rational thought against sensory perception and science against traditional knowledge.<sup>37</sup> Yet as Derrida argues, as long as thinking takes place along *the line*, this potentially leads to a repression of pluri-dimensional thought.<sup>38</sup>



One way to understand Derrida's claim is in relation to Heidegger's discussion of thinking. Rather, than being pluri-dimensional, science is *one-sided*, according to Heidegger, because it does not think the essence of its sphere and the origin of its manner of knowing.<sup>39</sup> In other words, science is limited to being one-sided, because science only knows its objects not the framework surrounding the appearance of its objects; it only knows one side of the *ontological difference*, namely beings. This leads Heidegger to claim that science does not think, which, however, must be understood broadly as a general critique of academia.<sup>40</sup> It can even be claimed that it is essential for science not to think because it must delimit itself to the objects of study in order to produce knowledge.<sup>41</sup> However, the problem is not solely that the poetics of clarity may exclude the possibility of thinking the framework of knowledge production (e.g. biases, interests, contexts, and poetic language use). Rather, the model of the line inscribes thinking within a framework of homogeneous and continuous reasoning characterised by logical succession. This model is prevalent within the poetics of clarity where thinking must move along the straight line of succession. As Ingold has shown, the straight line has become an icon of modernity in Western culture, where it offers reason certainty, authority and a sense of direction.<sup>42</sup> But according to Klee, while general lines clarify and purify the world, we must remember that the world extends beyond.<sup>43</sup> Thus, it is important to reflect upon what may be left out when thinking habitually follows the demand of the linearity inscribed in the poetics of clarity. As I will argue in the following, two important dimensions are constrained within this regime of linearity: errors and the possibility of describing a messy reality.

Errors are central parts of research. Yet within the regime of linearity, the exposition of errors might not easily fit. In the development of a successive argument, the inclusion of errors may lead to excurses and transgressions beyond the line. The IMRAD structure, but also more generally the demand for results and conclusions amplify this problematic. In *Scientific Style and Format*, the importance of publishing 'negative findings' is emphasised, because they 'provide valuable information for researchers and may keep them from travelling a false path of experimentation and repeating experiments that are unlikely to succeed'.<sup>44</sup> Yet the publication of errors is uncommon in academic papers, and usually they are omitted from the public appearance of science.<sup>45</sup> At present, negative findings are mainly published in a few dedicated journals.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, a study of the hidden results of clinical trials of antidepressant efficacy shows that almost all trials with 'positive' results have been published, while most trials with 'negative' results have remained unpublished.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, in some fields of research, 'almost all published studies show formally significant results'.<sup>48</sup> This is problematic because as Foucault has argued, errors are a central part of knowledge production. For example, medicine and botany,

consist of errors as well as truths, errors that are in no way residuals, or foreign bodies, but having their own positive functions and their own valid history, such that their roles are often indissociable from that of the truths.<sup>49</sup>



If errors are inseparable from truth, then to eliminate errors from the circulation of scientific knowledge through a structural ideal of linearity, may be destructive for the continued development of knowledge.

Academic writing modelled after the line not only excludes errors but more generally multi-dimensional thought and messy descriptions of reality. Thereby, the model of the line inserts teleological constraints on the possibilities for thinking within the line that must remain pure. According to Adorno, ideals of purity and cleanliness are shared as a repressive order by philosophy aiming at the eternal and flawlessly organised science.<sup>50</sup> For Adorno, the essay contains the possibility of emancipation, because it opens the possibility of a multi-dimensional and equivocal thinking that can transgress orthodox thought and let something appear, which has remained invisible, obscure, or hidden.<sup>51</sup> This possibility may reside in some texts I have analysed, particularly from literary studies. However, in general, knowledge production within the poetics of clarity remains tied to such ideals of cleanliness and purity. For example, the *MLA Handbook* advises that writers read over their outline and delete everything irrelevant or that might weaken the argument.<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, not only irrelevant elements must be deleted, even elements that might weaken the argument must be deleted as well! In contrast, multi-dimensional thought transgresses the line that structures thought into the coherent unfolding of *One* argument, which excludes errors, detours, and multiple-part arguments and even material that may weaken it. Multi-dimensional thought may better preserve the complexity of messy phenomena and manifold perspectives.

Even though thinking within a template does not entail that scientific practices embody a specific set of chronological sequences (e.g. IMRAD), it may privilege specific dimensions of academic work and determine their teleology. This specifically applies to IMRAD, but I believe the implications extend further because when thinking is subordinated the model of the line, not only errors but also multi-dimensional thinking is suppressed. Thereby, research focusing on more narrowly defined topics and problems is favoured, while multi-dimensional arguments attempting to unravel the complexity and messiness of reality may be constrained. Moreover, the exclusion of errors not merely entails their potentially infinite reproduction, but also leaves reflections on errors outside the public domain and constitutes a false appearance of the infallibility of science. Not only may other paths be productive to explore, but modelling thinking after a straight line may risk obscuring important parts of research that do not have a designated spot. Thinking does not grow out of the natural powers of the intellect, but out of these powers structured by the technology of writing, which within the poetics of clarity ascribes to the line.<sup>53</sup> Without writing we could not think as we do because writing is more than a mere secondary medium – it influences the composition of our thoughts. However, I am not arguing that we should always transgress the line but rather that we must preserve the possibility of transgression to secure a multiplicity of perspectives. Thinking along the line within a standardised template may yield a clearer (in the sense of readable and economical) univocal picture of reality, but it potentially undermines the progression of knowledge and represses alternate ways of thinking.



**Notes**

- 1 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 9.
- 2 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 10, 22.
- 3 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 21. See also Gross, Harmon, and Reidy, *Communicating Science*, 174.
- 4 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 21.
- 5 Peter Medawar, 'Is the Scientific Paper a Fraud?' in *The Threat and the Glory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 228–229.
- 6 Medawar, 'Is the Scientific Paper a Fraud?', 228–229.
- 7 Medawar, 'Is the Scientific Paper a Fraud?', 231–233.
- 8 Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge*, 100.
- 9 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 21.
- 10 Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge*, 101.
- 11 Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge*, 110.
- 12 Lord Brain, 'Structure of the Scientific Paper', *British Medical Journal* 2 (1965), 868.
- 13 Brain, 'Structure of the Scientific Paper', 868.
- 14 Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, 184.
- 15 See e.g. the *Publication Manual of APA*, the *ICMJE Recommendations*, and *The Journal of Neuroscience* guidelines.
- 16 Alan G. Gross, *The Rhetoric of Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 16.
- 17 Stefan Timmermans and Steven Epstein, 'A World of Standards but Not a Standard World: Toward a Sociology of Standards and Standardization', *Annual Review of Sociology* 3 (2010): 69–89, 79.
- 18 Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 125.
- 19 Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, 70.
- 20 Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique* (Paris: La fabrique-éditions, 2000), 60–61.
- 21 See also Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*. (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2016), Chapter 6.
- 22 Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1968), 157.
- 23 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge, 1932–1935: From the Notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret Macdonald*, ed. Alice Ambrose (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), 155.
- 24 Robin Holt and Frank Mueller, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Drawing Lines in Organization Studies', *Organization Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 2011): 67–84, 78.
- 25 Holt and Mueller, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Drawing Lines in Organization Studies', 81.
- 26 Ingold, *Lines*, Chapter 6.
- 27 Timmermans and Epstein, 'A World of Standards but Not a Standard World', 71.
- 28 Timmermans and Epstein, 'A World of Standards but Not a Standard World', 83.
- 29 Timmermans and Epstein, 'A World of Standards but Not a Standard World', 83–84.
- 30 Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 9 and 12.
- 31 Pierre Bourdieu, *Science de la science et réflexivité* (Paris: Éditions raisons d'agir, 2001), 148–149.
- 32 Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science*, 1.
- 33 Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 127.
- 34 Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 128.
- 35 Punday, *Narrative after Deconstruction*, 29.
- 36 Ingold, *Lines*, Chapter 6.
- 37 Ingold, *Lines*, Chapter 6.
- 38 Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 128.



- 39 Heidegger, *Was heisst Denken*, 57.
- 40 Heidegger, *Was heisst Denken*, 3.
- 41 See Trish Glazebrook, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Science* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2000), 217.
- 42 Ingold, *Lines*, Chapter 6.
- 43 Holt and Mueller, 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Drawing Lines in Organization Studies', 69.
- 44 *Scientific Style and Format*, 2.2.
- 45 *Scientific Style and Format*, 2.2.
- 46 For example, *Journal of Negative Results in Biomedicine* and *Journal of Articles in Support of the Null Hypothesis*. Perhaps ironically, the *Journal of Negative Results in Biomedicine* ceased to be published in 2017, while the latest issue of *Journal of Articles in Support of the Null Hypothesis* was also published in 2017.
- 47 Young, Ioannidis, and Al-Ubaydli, 'Why Current Publication Practices May Distort Science', 4.
- 48 Young, Ioannidis, and Al-Ubaydli, 'Why Current Publication Practices May Distort Science', 4.
- 49 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 223/*L'ordre du discours*, 33.
- 50 Adorno, 'Der Essay als Form', 14–15.
- 51 Adorno, 'Der Essay als Form', 30–32.
- 52 *MLA Handbook*, 43.
- 53 This runs parallel with Ong's argument (see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 77).



## 9 Thinking the limits and the limits for thinking

### The inherent positivist bias

Clarity is a remarkably fluid concept that crosses historical and disciplinary boundaries. It even transgresses apparently incommensurable conceptions of the world and the knowing subject.<sup>1</sup> Yet the poetics of clarity entails a purification of knowledge production. In this purification, clarity becomes selective, and simultaneously creates possibilities for thinking and restricts it within academia. In its selective and restrictive state, clarity can be conceived as a productive constraint that organises knowledge production and enables the possibility of accessible knowledge, but always on an opaque background of the expelled (as we have seen: poetic language, biases, interests, contexts, multi-dimensional perspectives and errors).<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the poetics of clarity is characterised by an inherent tension between securing the vitality of thinking or leading to its potential demise. As I will argue in this chapter, the current selective and restrictive state of clarity is based on a set of assumptions about the objects of knowledge and the knowing subjects that resonate with positivism. It is these inherent assumptions that I will explore now and reflect on what they may entail for thinking within academia today. Such reflections will also lead to a meta-questioning of how the boundaries of thinking can be thought.

To begin with, it must be noted that positivism is not a static unity but has taken different forms throughout history.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it can even be claimed that 64 possible forms of positivism exist.<sup>4</sup> Thus, I only use ‘positivism’ as an approximation; I do not claim all ‘positivisms’ are alike, but I have found it necessary to give a name to the inherent assumptions within the poetics of clarity. ‘Positivism’ appeared to be a suitable name because, despite the variances, similarities exist between various forms of positivism that resonate with inherent presuppositions in the poetics of clarity. Below I will relate some basic assumptions inscribed in the poetics of clarity to certain tenets of (particularly logical) positivism to sketch out the presuppositions in more detail.

At the level of sentence formation, it is taken for granted that language depicts an independent external reality within the poetics of clarity. Scientific language is conceived as a servant that must function as a vessel for truth, and a conception of truth as correspondence between words and world is presupposed. This conception is deeply entrenched in our way of looking at the world.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in modern societies, ideas of truth, exactitude, and solidity are almost exclusively associated with



natural science.<sup>6</sup> But the conception particularly resembles the positivist critique of metaphysics, which demands that words must have a clear meaning that can be verified in the empirical world.<sup>7</sup> In its extreme form, empiricism leads to a reduction of science to statements about directly observable facts.<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on language use as clearly tied to the world resonates with the accentuation of the ideational dimension of language within the poetics of clarity. Furthermore, the poetics of clarity and positivism share a basic distinction between literary language and scientific language. For example, Ayer distinguishes between literary language use that arouses emotions and scientific language use that aims at the truth.<sup>9</sup> However, poetic devices are not merely banished because they are seen as a threat to truth and verifiability, but maybe also because they reveal a dimension of knowledge production that is so conveniently hidden in the image of the scientist as discovering an independent world and uncovering it in clear writing, namely a creative dimension of language and thinking.

At the level of authorial positioning, the idea of an external reality that must be depicted clearly is further emphasised by the (ideal) relationship between researchers and research. Knowledge is presented as independent of the knowledge producers, who are conceived as objective persons discovering an autonomous world. Thereby, the knowing subjects become dissociated from the world they discover. This resonates with positivism, which often entails an empiricist theory of knowledge, which presupposes a dualistic distinction between the knowing subject and the known object.<sup>10</sup> This dualism demarcates the world as 'readymade' and independent of knowledge producers, and the knowing subject is a passive receiver.<sup>11</sup> Positivism accentuates this disengagement with its attempted expulsion of subjectivity in knowledge production.<sup>12</sup> This dichotomy between subject and world is a basic assumption inherent in the poetics of clarity that it shares with positivism. Both entail ontological and anthropological presuppositions, namely the existence of a mind-independent 'readymade' world and a disengaged knowing subject. The researcher is a discoverer, not a creator.

Finally, the level of structural organisation indicates the import of the model of the line. This model entails that the presentation of truth is inscribed within a demand for continuous logical succession. But the logical succession is built up by the division of the basic elements of an inquiry that can be fitted together and establish the progression of the argument. Likewise, in certain developments of positivism reside an understanding of the proper analysis as an analytical reduction of propositions to elementary propositions. For example, Wittgenstein argues that empirical reality is limited by the totality of objects and that this limit also shows itself in the totality of elementary propositions.<sup>13</sup> This is a world Russell can only dream about where everything is unambiguous and has an identity that is not affected by anything else.<sup>14</sup> Even though there has been no indication of the level of atomism going all the way down to propositions in the poetics of clarity, the play between division and succession fundamental to the building up of an argument resembles the general idea of a world that can be split up into autonomous parts. The demand for restricting articles to one main argument pertaining to a well-defined and clearly demarcated problem marks this idea of atomism. For example,



in philosophy, Stewart has argued that the model of science leads to a development of articles with minute problems.<sup>15</sup> The strict demarcation and possibility of dividing reality into elementary topics for inquiry resonates with the narrow focus on a specialised problem seen in most articles within the poetics of clarity.

Consequently, the ways in which the poetics of clarity favours specific ways of sentence formation, authorial positioning, and textual organisation can largely be tied to positivism. The (ideal) expulsion of poetic devices from knowledge production, the constitution of a neutral and detached knowledge producer, and the logical argumentative linear organisation of an argument concerning a demarcated problem attest to this positivist bias. Thus, inherent in the poetics of clarity resides a positivist bias with a set of basic assumptions, namely that researchers discover an external world and must present their findings in a clear neutral language (zero style) that functions as a vessel for the development and response to a specialised and demarcated problem. Now the next step is to reflect upon what this inherent positivist bias may entail for thinking. I will attempt to reach an answer to this question by reflecting on the potential boundaries that the poetics of clarity establishes for thinking. However, before we can consider the potential consequences, we must consider how we think the boundaries for thinking.

One way to understand the boundaries for thinking set up within the poetics of clarity is to turn to Foucault's study of the historical boundaries of thinking in *Les mots et les choses*, which opens with the question: 'what is it impossible to think'.<sup>16</sup> Foucault's way to answer this question is to introduce the concept *episteme* to designate a silent grid that regulates the field of possible knowledge at a point in time.<sup>17</sup> For Foucault, the episteme functions as a historical a priori that demarcates a field of possible experience and defines the modes of being of objects that appear within this field.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, historical epochs differ in terms of what is thinkable not merely, what people think.<sup>19</sup> Recently, Bowker and Star have also argued that standards and classification valorise a point of view while silencing another.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps, then it could be claimed that the poetics of clarity demarcates an epistemological field that defines a specific way of being of the objects of study and the gaze of the knowing subjects while silencing alternatives.

In the poetics of clarity, the knowing subject stands in a relationship of exteriority with the world and language is conceived as a neutral vessel for knowledge. Thereby, we may conceive the positivist bias inherent in the poetics of clarity as not just prescribing specific ways of expression, but as constituting specific possibilities for perception and thinking particularly pertaining to the objects of study and methods, which may favour measurability and quantification. These positivist assumptions resonate with certain traits of the *classical episteme* Foucault describes as the age where language becomes a remedy for knowledge and enters its transparent and neutral state.<sup>21</sup> In the classical episteme, language is understood as a means for possessing ideas and for communicating (or rather transmitting) them to others.<sup>22</sup> But to function as a tool for knowledge production, language may need to be 'readjusted if necessary so that the chain of knowledge may be made visible in all its clarity, without shadows or lacunae'.<sup>23</sup> This dream of clarity resembles the ideal of absolute clarity within the poetics of clarity.



However, with this resemblance between the contemporary poetics of clarity and Foucault's classical episteme emerges a problem because a central tenet in Foucault's elucidation of the historical formations of knowledge production is that the episteme is what makes all knowledge possible and necessary at a point in time. As Foucault explicates: 'in any given culture and at any given moment there is always only one *episteme* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge'.<sup>24</sup> Thus, there can be only one episteme existing as the condition for the possibility of knowledge and truth at a time. This claim becomes a problem for the parallel between the classical episteme as Foucault describes it and the poetics of clarity in contemporary academic writing because Foucault specifically dates the classical episteme to the period between 1650 and 1800. According to Foucault, around 1800 a rupture occurred that radically changed knowledge production.<sup>25</sup> Given Foucault's claim that only one *episteme* defining the conditions of possibility of all knowledge exists at a time, it might appear surprising to find resemblances between the classical episteme and the poetics of clarity today. Yet in Foucault's ambiguous descriptions of historical necessity and discontinuity lies a possible way out of this discrepancy.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the grandiose claim that at a given point in time there can be only one episteme, Foucault also claims certain pre-critical lacunae exist in the *modern episteme*. According to Foucault, within the modern episteme, representation can no longer stand alone as a foundation for knowledge.<sup>27</sup> However, as Foucault underscores, even though this event is one of the most important changes in Western culture, it passes unnoticed since language is used without an awareness of the changes.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, for Foucault, there exists a lacuna in the modern episteme, where the sciences continue to write as they did in the classical episteme. Within this lacuna resides a positivist dream of mirroring nature, which entails a continued interest in polishing scientific language to the point of precision making it function as a meticulous doubling.<sup>29</sup> This lacuna characterised by a positivist dream resembling Russell's may explain why the poetics of clarity resembles the classical episteme. Though, from a contemporary viewpoint, the poetics of clarity appears to be more than a mere lacuna because of its prevalence across disciplinary borders. So perhaps, it may be possible to conceive the poetics of clarity as parallel with what Foucault designates as an episteme that determines the boundaries of thinking?

Yet to argue that the poetics of clarity determines the boundaries of thinking may be problematic because I thereby risk conflating the limits of expression with the limits of thought. As Wittgenstein has argued, drawing a limit on the expression of thought is not the same as drawing a limit on thought, because to think the limit of thought one must necessarily think both sides of the limit.<sup>30</sup> Or as Hegel emphasised in his critique of Kant; drawing a limit on thought takes one beyond the limit because knowing something is a limit entails that one has already moved beyond it.<sup>31</sup> Thus, to think the limit is already to transgress it, which entails that the limit breaks down. This problem of thinking the boundaries of thinking appears to be particularly problematic if we understand the limits of thinking with a potentially all-encompassing concept such as the episteme. However, when Foucault



emphasises the lacunae, the epistemological space Foucault describes seems to scatter and the spell of historical determinism may dissolve. Thus, Foucault's epistemes cannot be thought of as one-dimensional grand scale spaces for thinking. Yet Foucault's thinking of the boundaries of thinking still risks ending with the problem of the impossibility of drawing borders, because of the inherent ambiguity in Foucault's descriptions that at times appears to describe the limits as historical absolutes.

I believe a more fruitful way of thinking the boundaries of the thinkable exists in Rancière's work. In my initial description of his poetics of knowledge, I claimed that a poetics of knowledge does not merely concern how knowledge is written, but also touches upon the question of the thinkable. To articulate how a poetics potentially demarcates the thinkable, Rancière uses the concept *regime* – a historically variable place in which objects are thinkable, and in which truth can be produced.<sup>32</sup> This, however, may sound very similar to Foucault's epistemes. Indeed, as Rancière points out, similar with Foucault he has attempted 'to historicize the transcendental' but Rancière immediately underscores what he sees as a crucial difference between his work and Foucault's, namely that he has also attempted 'to de-historicize these systems of conditions of possibility'.<sup>33</sup> While Rancière understands poetic regimes as conditions for writing and thinking, these regimes are not exhaustive of the possibilities of knowledge production at a specific point in time.<sup>34</sup> Rather, regimes co-exist in varying ways and may overlap, and one regime does not delimit all options of expression and thought.<sup>35</sup> It remains, therefore, possible to think the poetics of clarity as constituting specific patterns of thought and potentially as constraining, without constituting a totalitarian framework that determines an absolute limit of thought. This way of thinking the boundaries of the thinkable does not lead to the problem of the limit because the limit is relative to a given regime. However, to transgress the limit may likely entail thinking within another regime although the regimes are malleable systems.<sup>36</sup> *Everything can be thought, but not necessarily within one regime.* This understanding harmonises better with the poetics of clarity as a multi-dimensional field of tension, because, as I have shown, marked variances exist within this field of tension, and transgressions that point to other poetic regimes at work in the contemporary field of knowledge production.

Although the import of Rancière's concept *regime* may dissolve the problem of thinking the limit, the difference between the limits of expression and the limits of thought appears to remain blurred. Yet perhaps this difference cannot be rigidly maintained. Indeed, Wittgenstein's own distinction between drawing a limit on the expression of thought and drawing a limit on thought appears to dissolve when he claims: 'everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be put into words can be put clearly'.<sup>37</sup> Wittgenstein thereby asserts that both thinking and language are subjected to the same ideal. In conjunction with the final remark of the *Tractatus*: 'what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence',<sup>38</sup> Wittgenstein establishes a strict regime of clarity that not only concerns the expression of thought but also thinking, where only propositions from natural science are conceived as meaningful.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Day and Gastel



exemplify how the ideal of clarity concerns more than the expression of thought: ‘successful scientific experimentation is the result of a clear mind attacking a clearly stated problem and producing clearly stated conclusions. Ideally, clarity should be a characteristic of any type of communication’.<sup>40</sup> These extensions of clarity from the domains of expression to the domains of thinking also entail the development of a *presentational monism* where the ideal of clarity is conceived as universally applicable across various topics. Thus, the ideal of clarity not merely concerns expression but also sets limits for thought.

In a passing remark, I claimed that *everything can be thought, but not necessarily within one specific poetic regime*. When clarity becomes a selective and restrictive ideal and imports a positivist bias within the poetics of clarity, thinking may become restricted. However, this does not mean that the poetics of clarity establishes an absolute limit: everything might still be thinkable, but the presentational monism may lead to a homogenising of perspectives. Even though poetic norms may appear as solely carving out a domain of expression when a selective ideal of clarity with an inherent positivist bias demarcates these norms they are not exterior to the production of knowledge, because they may favour specific objects of study and ways of studying them. With its inherent positivist bias, the poetics of clarity sets a limit for what will be conceived as meaningful, significant, and knowledge within academia – to be heard one must be *within the true*.

To be *within the true* (*dans le vrai*) is an expression shared by Foucault and Rancière to designate the historically variable rules of acceptability a text must conform with to be accepted as knowledge.<sup>41</sup> Based on this, Foucault can describe Mendel as a monster who attempted to speak the truth outside of *the true* in a space of wild exteriority, i.e. without conforming to the standards of acceptability specific to his time.<sup>42</sup> But there is an important difference between the poetics of clarity and Foucault’s example of Mendel being outside of the true. For Foucault, the disciplinary character of a discourse provides statements with the possibility of being true or false, and in order for the truth-value of a set of statements to be assessed, they must satisfy the norms within a specific discipline.<sup>43</sup> The standards of acceptability may vary significantly across disciplinary borders concerning canonised methods, theoretical frameworks, suitable objects of study, etc. However, the poetics of clarity functions trans-disciplinarily and I do not intend to claim that the poetics of clarity determines such disciplinary standards. But to be published, thinking must conform with standards of acceptability set up within the poetics of clarity.

More than merely functioning as a secondary standard of expression, I believe that given the demand to publish (or perish!) within academia, the poetics of clarity may impact certain choices pertaining to methods, theoretical framework, objects of study, and questions asked. For example, as Polanyi argues, only articles that appear plausible are accepted for publication and ‘such decisions are based on fundamental convictions about the nature of things and about the method’.<sup>44</sup> While a text with a clearly demarcated problem that is answered through canonised methods and concepts in a disinterested logically successive way of argumentation easily fits within the poetics of clarity, a text with a broad



topic comprising multiple arguments that unfolds an engaged messy picture of reality might not be published.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the inherent positivist bias may demarcate the questions deemed significant and prefigure the appropriate answers. In conjunction with the demand to be published, the easiest way for researchers to promote their career may be to comply with clarity as a cognitive value and present their results as pure, one-dimensional, etc.<sup>46</sup> The demand for clarity may exclude complex and messy truths. Thus, an ideal of purity is ingrained in the poetics of clarity, which may favour a well-organised thinking along the lines of already accepted concepts, methods, and questions.

When clarity becomes selective and restrictive, it may be productive as a standardised medium for sharing knowledge, but it may also entail a privileging of certain ways of thinking. While standardisation can unite a scientific field, it can also constitute dominance of specific presuppositions, methodological preferences, and (types of) questions deemed significant across disciplines.<sup>47</sup> However, we must bear in mind that the poetics of clarity is not a uniform space for thinking but fluctuates in multiple directions and consists of various tensions. Yet despite being a multi-dimensional field of tension, the poetics of clarity may entail that research projects that are compatible or conform with the positivist bias are privileged, while other projects may be conceived as obscure, and thus may be pressurised into conformity or restricted (remain unpublished). Thus, it is crucial to notice that the transparent ideal of language is not innocent.<sup>48</sup> Rather than providing a topic-neutral medium for thinking, the poetics of clarity may restrict thinking beneath its innocent façade. But this does not entail that we cannot write outside the poetics of clarity: not only is there always the possibility of different competing poetics (as literary studies exemplify in my analysis), it is also always possible to escape the poetic boundaries. Yet, the danger of writing outside is neither to be heard nor to be published.

The poetics of clarity may be highly productive for knowledge production, but because of it being selective and restrictive, it may entail not only vitality but also conformism and potentially inhibit thinking. Yet, in and of itself the poetics of clarity is not problematic, but if it gains hegemony, it may lead to a homogenising of thinking. This homogenising can be understood as an intellectual consequence of a global academic culture that institutionalises the rational.<sup>49</sup> The tendency of an increasing homogeneity in contemporary scientific writing may be problematic because it risks enclosing thinking within boundaries that are too strict.<sup>50</sup> Clarity is a relational concept that can carry radically different assumptions about the world and the knowing subject or in Proust's words: 'each of us sees clarity only in those ideas which have the same degree of confusion as his own'.<sup>51</sup> But because of its inherent positivist bias, it may become restrictive within the poetics of clarity. Hence, it is crucial to realise that the poetics of clarity does not provide a neutral and divine medium for thought. Beneath its apparent topic-neutrality lies a highly selective and restrictive system of knowledge production that may rule out other topics and perspectives and undermine crucial dimensions of knowledge production. The poetics of clarity may support the vitality of thinking within academia, but because of its success as a medium for thought it also entails the potential demise of thinking.



## Notes

- 1 For example, compare Plato, *Phaedrus*, 278a; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 'Preface to an Edition of Nizolius', in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. Leroy E. Loemker, vol. I (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 187; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Book 3, § 173 'Being deep and seeming deep'.
- 2 For a description of how rules are productive in the creation of discourse, but are simultaneously constraining see Foucault, *L'ordre du discours*, 38. For a general discussion of how form is a productive constraint see also Coe, 'An Arousing and Fulfilment of Desires', 185.
- 3 David Frisby, 'Introduction to the English Translation', in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1977), ix–xliv, x.
- 4 Jerzy Giedymin, 'Antipositivism in Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science and Humanities'. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 26, no. 4 (1975): 275–301, 276.
- 5 Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner, *Clear and Simple as the Truth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 108.
- 6 Lepenies, *Between Literature and Science*, 10.
- 7 Jon Stewart, *The Unity of Form and Content in Philosophical Writing* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 6.
- 8 Giedymin, 'Antipositivism in Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science and Humanities', 276.
- 9 Alfred J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: The Camelot Press Ltd., 1936), 36–37.
- 10 Mikael Carleheden, 'Reconstructing Epistemology: Toward a Post-Positivist Conception of Social Science'. Sociologisk laboratorium, Aalborg universitet, 1999, 13.
- 11 Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 132. See also Carleheden, 'Reconstructing Epistemology', 13.
- 12 Thomas and Turner, *Clear and Simple as the Truth*, 106.
- 13 Andrew Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2008), 174.
- 14 Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 170.
- 15 Stewart, *The Unity of Form and Content in Philosophical Writing*, 4.
- 16 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), xvi/ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 7.
- 17 Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 171.
- 18 Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 171.
- 19 Ann Swidler, and Jorge Ardití. 'The New Sociology of Knowledge'. *Annual Review of Sociology* 2 (1994): 305–329, 314.
- 20 Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 5.
- 21 Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 70.
- 22 Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 129/*The Order of Things*, 155.
- 23 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 96/*Les mots et les choses*, 101.
- 24 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 183/*Les mots et les choses*, 179.
- 25 Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 238.
- 26 Foucault's descriptions of historical necessity appear ambiguous, because rather than solely describing historical change as radical breaks without any relation between different epistemological fields, Foucault also describes change as transformations and mutations. For example, throughout *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault uses the description of change as mutations extensively (see e.g. p. 14, 150, 244, 323, 347).
- 27 Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 251–252.
- 28 Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 294.



- 29 Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 309–310.
- 30 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), ‘Vorwort/Preface’; Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 171–172.
- 31 Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 172.
- 32 Rancière, *Les noms de l’histoire*, 106, 124.
- 33 Jacques Rancière and Gabriel Rockhill, ‘The Janus-Face of Politicized Art: Jacques Rancière in Interview with Gabriel Rockhill’, in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2009), 50. A similar point is made elsewhere, when Rancière stresses the importance of simultaneously implementing historicising and untimeliness (see Jacques Rancière, ‘Afterword/The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions’, in *Jacques Rancière. History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 282). Rancière also acknowledges the analogy between his work and that of Foucault in *Le partage du sensible*, 13.
- 34 See also Gabriel Rockhill, *Radical History and the Politics of Art* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), 149.
- 35 Eric Méchoulan, ‘Sophisticated Continuities and Historical Discontinuities, or, Why Not Protagoras?’, in *Jacques Rancière. History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2009), 55–66, 56.
- 36 Rockhill, *Radical History and the Politics of Art*, 149.
- 37 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, § 4.116.
- 38 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, § 7.
- 39 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, § 6.53.
- 40 Day and Gastel, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper*, 4.
- 41 Foucault, *L’ordre du discours*, 35–36; Rancière, *Les noms de l’histoire*, 76. The idea of being *in the true* is originally articulated by Canguilhem (Foucault, *L’ordre du discours*, 36). However, Canguilhem uses the term to describe the predication of a universal and objective truth (Han, *Foucault’s Critical Project*, 82).
- 42 Foucault, *L’ordre du discours*, 37.
- 43 Han, *Foucault’s Critical Project*, 86.
- 44 Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 64.
- 45 For example, Stewart has argued that the demand in philosophy of developing minute problems leads to a privileging of specific topics that fit better (*The Unity of Form and Content in Philosophical Writing*, 4).
- 46 Holmes, for example, shows how results are manipulated to be univocal in the transformation from laboratory notes to scientific publication (Frederic Lawrence Holmes, *Claude Bernard and Animal Chemistry, the Emergence of a Scientist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).
- 47 Lamont and Molnár, ‘The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences’, 180–181.
- 48 Patti Lather, ‘Troubling Clarity: The Politics of Accessible Language’, *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 3 (September 1996): 525–546, 528.
- 49 See also Swidler and Ardit. ‘The New Sociology of Knowledge’, 314.
- 50 Gross, Harmon, and Reidy have pointed out the tendency of increasing homogenisation in *Communicating Science* (162).
- 51 Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove. In Search of the Lost Time II* (New York, NY: Random House, 1998), 171.



## 10 Clarity

### A potential acceleration of thinking?

In my reflections on the potential consequences for thinking, I have focused on the poetics of clarity as a space for textual production and thinking. However, particularly because of the centrality of the ideal of a textual economy of necessity, the poetics of clarity also inscribes thinking within a *regime of speed*. The ideal of a textual economy of necessity does not merely concern textual spaces, but ideally also a minimising of the duration of reading. Consequently, it inscribes a specific regime of high-speed consumption within the poetics of clarity, which is widely distributed across disciplinary borders. In this chapter, I discuss this regime of speed and its potential consequences for thinking within academia. This move imports a change of perspective from writing and thinking to reading and thinking. As I will argue, the inscription of reading and thinking within a regime of speed, which subordinates them to a demand of high-speed consumption may accelerate thinking, but can also inhibit thinking, because of the demand of high-speed thought without time for reflection.

Within the poetics of clarity, the focus on the velocity of consumption inscribes the poetics of clarity within a regime of speed. Indeed, as described in the *APA Publication Manual* ‘we have gone from a population that reads articles to one that “consumes content”’.<sup>1</sup> The ideal of a fast-paced consumption entails that the content must be readily available and everything that can slow the reader down must be eliminated. This preference finds support in a basic premise Spencer expresses: ‘the more time and attention it takes to receive and understand each sentence, the less time and attention can be given to the contained idea’.<sup>2</sup> To decrease the duration of reading, the necessary content must be transmitted in its purity freed from distractions. With the accelerated production of knowledge and the endless stacks of papers, the possibility of fast-paced consumption becomes a crucial premise for the continued vitality of knowledge production. This regime of speed resonates with Marinetti’s salute to speed as offering new possibilities, rather than as a negative consequence of capitalist production:<sup>3</sup>

Tortuous paths, roads that follow the indolence of streams and wind along the spines and uneven bellies of mountains, these are the laws of the earth. Never straight lines; always arabesques and zigzags. Speed finally gives to human life one of the characteristics of divinity: *the straight line*.<sup>4</sup>



In his text from 1916, Marinetti ushers a new age. This is our age – an age ‘obsessed with speed’.<sup>5</sup> Virilio has described the birth of the modern age as a *democratic revolution* in which a transformation occurs from metabolic speed – a natural speed of the known body – to *technological speed* – the artificial speed of the dead (machines).<sup>6</sup> This transformation is a change from *the age of brakes* to *the age of acceleration*. In the *age of acceleration*, transport and circulation are revolutionised leading to a deterritorialisation: ‘all the surfaces of the globe are directly present to one another’.<sup>7</sup> Thereby, technological developments enhance the circulation of scientific knowledge: no longer bound to letters, telegrams, books, or paper, texts fluctuate non-materially on the internet without distances and borders (although not necessarily as open-access). With the development of tele-culture, language has become globalised and subject to a new temporality and materiality.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps these developments in direction of a non-materialised, boundless fluctuation of knowledge can lead to a mobilisation and acceleration of thinking?

The faster readers can move from text to text and from texts to their own work, thinking necessarily accelerates, mobility increases, and boundaries expand (or ideally dissolve). Velocity can be associated with a desire for the new and unexplored, while its opposite, *slowness*, can be associated with immobile adoration of obstacles, nostalgia, and passivity.<sup>9</sup> As such, the ‘virtues of newness’ can be linked to capitalism.<sup>10</sup> Yet the acceleration of the velocity of consumption and the (in principle) limitless circulation could entail an increased danger of misunderstanding. This danger points back to Socrates’ pessimistic questioning of writing in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Although the *Phaedrus* was written at the early beginnings of philosophy, the questioning of writing is surprisingly relevant from a contemporary perspective, particularly in relation to the (potentially) limitless circulation of knowledge. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates expresses his mistrust of writing:

There is something odd about writing, Phaedrus, which makes it exactly like painting. The offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask them a question they maintain an aloof of silence. It’s the same with written words: you might think they were speaking as if they had some intelligence, but if you want an explanation of any of the things they’re saying and you ask them about it, they just go on and on for ever giving the same single piece of information. Once any account has been written down, you find it all over the place, hobnobbing with completely inappropriate people no less than with those who understand it, and completely failing to know who it should and shouldn’t talk to. And faced with rudeness and unfair abuse it always needs its father to come to its assistance, since it is incapable of defending or helping itself.<sup>11</sup>

Here Socrates juxtaposes writing with painting, because they both appear lifelike, but are mute when asked a question. Thus, writing is an odd mixed category – a living dead. Socrates’ mistrust of writing concerns the incapability of writing to engage in a dialogue. In contrast to a conversation, the author is not present



to defend her claims. Furthermore, writing is incapable of choosing whom to communicate with; rather, it is circulating ‘all over the place, hobnobbing with completely inappropriate people no less than with those who understand it’. This problem of an excessive circulation is further problematised by Socrates’ juxtaposition of words with seeds. Words must be planted with care and need time to grow and spread; writing can accelerate this as if words were planted in the *gardens of Adonis* in which they grow and spread rapidly.<sup>12</sup> However, this acceleration of growth and dissemination can lead to monstrous misunderstandings. Hence, writing is a *pharmakon*; it is simultaneously a drug and poison that can guard against forgetting but also lead to widespread misunderstandings.<sup>13</sup>

The mobilisation of thinking through writing as a *pharmakon* is enhanced further in the *age of acceleration* where texts are (potentially) freed from their material basis and circulate digitally on a global scale. Although Socrates’ alternative to writing also removes thinking from a material basis as an inscription in the souls that can defend a point, respond to critique, and choose their interlocutors, it remains closely tied to an oral culture.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the ambivalence of the speed of consumption becomes visible in the problematising of writing as a *pharmakon*: the increasing mobility and speed can accelerate thinking but can also lead to widespread misunderstandings. How can the acceleration of thinking avoid leading to misunderstandings that could undermine knowledge production and poison thinking?

Plato’s writing in the *Phaedrus* provides an interesting solution to this problem through its ambivalent meta-position exemplified by the apparent problem of how the critique of writing can itself be written! Plato’s paradoxical position can be understood in relation to a change at the time; after centuries, writing had finally become interiorised and accepted.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Plato is writing at a threshold between oral culture and the beginning of writing, and only by using the technology of writing can he forcefully criticise writing.<sup>16</sup> However, it is important to notice that the *Phaedrus* is written in an ironic and reflective style. This reflective way of writing lets the dialogue transgress the critique of writing – the dialogue becomes a *living writing*. But even though Plato’s reflective writing may suspend authorial authority and force readers to think for themselves, maybe this style would rather lead to a multiplication of misunderstandings in the age of acceleration, particularly if submitted to the demand of a fast-paced consumption.

In contrast to Plato’s reflective writing, the poetics of clarity subjects textual production to radically different ideals and demands. As I have shown, these ideals can form various tensions in relation to their prospective audiences, and they are embodied differently in the multi-dimensional field of tension. Despite this conceptual fluidity, in general, textual production within the poetics of clarity is marked by diverse attempts to minimise misunderstandings. For example, at the level of sentence formation, texts produced within the poetics of clarity appear to fluctuate between the principles of readability, precision, and textual economy in terms of word choice and sentence structure. These variances exemplify different ways of attempting to minimise misunderstandings and control the reader’s comprehension of the text. Moreover, at the level of textual structure, standardised



structures may not merely yield a template for writing and thinking clearly, but also establishes a uniform template that guides the reader through texts. Perhaps texts produced within the poetics of clarity are controlling and restricting the movements of the readers to minimise the risk of misunderstandings and secure fast-paced consumption?

This tentative formulation of the question of control of the reader's movements resonates with Iser's conception of a *total organisation* of a text. For Iser, 'total organization would mean that there was nothing left for the reader to do and, furthermore, that the combination of elements together with their comprehension, could be defined in a total manner'.<sup>17</sup> In Iser's theory of reading, texts exert different degrees of control and organise reading in different ways. However, he distinguishes between scientific texts and literature, because a total organisation that control the movements and understandings of readers may be possible in scientific texts.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, literature typically comprise *blanks* (*leerstellen*) that condition the readers' movements in a text.<sup>19</sup> Blanks are empty textual spaces that require determination and reading literature entails filling in blanks.<sup>20</sup> Through this process of filling in, literary texts are actualised in the reading(s).<sup>21</sup> In this way, the literary work can be conceived as an *event*, i.e. as a temporal dynamic process of actualisation.<sup>22</sup> Yet the understanding of texts as events is restricted to literary texts. In contrast, scientific texts ultimately render the readers passive through restrictive textual topographies that limit blanks.

In the poetics of clarity, the banishment of poetic language and the standardised templates of presentation are ways of minimising blanks and attempting to secure a total organisation of the text. The restricted textual topographies produced within the poetics of clarity reduce texts to static, finished unities available to a fast-paced consumption – a kind of military order (of militarily organised surfaces of the text)<sup>23</sup> that substitutes the interactive play between reader and text for a set of commands that control the reader's movements and restricts the associative possibilities. Reading within a controlled textual topography becomes a thinking along or against the line, but not a thinking across or beyond. Restricting textual topographies limits the danger of misunderstanding and provides an alternative answer to Socrates' *fear of writing*. However, this solution would not be acceptable for Socrates, because in our *digital gardens of Adonis*, texts are deader than ever, in comparison with Plato's attempts at a living writing, and circulating wider without the capacity to defend themselves.

Yet, rather than seeing the accelerated circulation of texts as problematic, the *orphaned letters* have a democratic potential. While Socrates describes the *orphaned letter* as a threat, Rancière sees the *orphaned letter* as the possibility of an *excess of words* that can lead to an uncontrolled democracy that undoes the order of distribution, because anyone has access to the power of words.<sup>24</sup> The order of distribution, which separates those who can and those who cannot think is also designated by Rancière as *Plato's lie*.<sup>25</sup> Rancière attempts to overthrow the performance of inequality inherent in Plato's lie, which is emphasised when Rancière, for example, claims there is 'no language of the master, no language of the language whose words and sentences are able to speak the reason of the words



and sentences of a text'.<sup>26</sup> The excess of words entails a potential of redistribution since they can be appropriated by anyone.<sup>27</sup> Thus, perhaps the accelerated circulation of texts is productive for thinking, seen both from an individual perspective (it is possible to read many texts from all over the world) and more importantly from a political perspective (the broad distribution does away with social/political/intellectual orders). By modelling the textual topographies after an ideal of high-speed consumption, reading can move at a faster pace and potentially thinking can accelerate. Thus, the poetics of clarity can lead to a more efficient, productive, and energetic thinking. Finally, thinking can speed up and move effortlessly beyond the laws of the earth, across mountaintops, through streams, in a *straight line*.

Within the poetics of clarity, the ideal of efficiency rules the textual topographies and submits reading to the constraint of time. By subordinating reading to the ideal of efficiency, the textual topographies are modelled after a straight line resembling Marinetti's description of speed as finally giving human life the characteristics of divinity. Restricting the text to the necessary amount needed to unfold a topic can be seen as a way to avoid misunderstandings because the reader is spared from unnecessary details and excurses that might confuse them or let their mind wander. The textual straight line constitutes a topography, through which the reader can pass at high-speed without distractions, zigzags, or excurses. Yet even though 'one must persecute, lash, torture all those who sin against speed', I will now take the position of the 'long-haired bespectacled dirty philosopher' Marinetti charges with slowness and the 'immobile adoration of obstacles',<sup>28</sup> and reflect upon how the ideal of a fast-paced consumption inscribed within the poetics of clarity may be problematic for reading and thinking.

When a textual topography is modelled after necessity and pace, the possibility of excess and associative spaces is transformed to the minimal and reduced information of only what fits within a single narrative or argument. Here, however, we must distinguish between two levels of excess: *an excess of words* and a *textual excess*. First, as discussed above, an *excess of words* and a democratic potential inherent in a wider circulation of writing exist. The excess of words can mobilise, redistribute, and move thinking beyond boundaries. In this way, the wider circulation in combination with the ideal of broad readability may indeed accelerate thinking. Yet in this excessive circulation, knowledge production also risks losing itself in the very excessiveness and moving away from patient research.<sup>29</sup> Second, there is also a question of a *textual excess*. The limiting of textual excess within the poetics of clarity can arrest, disrupt, and police thinking. Hence, what is problematic within the poetics of clarity is not the excessive circulation, but rather the limitation of textual excess and the subordination of reading (and thus, also thinking) under the ideal of a velocity of consumption. The limitation of textual excess shields readers from the complexity that does not fit (be it poetic language, biases and interests, or multi-dimensional arguments and errors), but thereby readers may not encounter any surplus that could play a heuristic function for thinking.<sup>30</sup> The policing of textual excess potentially disrupts the possibilities of mobilisation and acceleration of thinking.

Once the poetics of clarity puts textual topographies under the reign of efficiency that measures texts by their capacity to be consumed at a high pace, the



political order inherent in Socrates' *fear of writing* is substituted for another order, which restricts the possible textual excess and entails a *fear of reading*. As long as the excess of words is produced within the poetics of clarity and its particular regime of speed, a different and highly problematic order is inserted, which limits textual excess and thus reading and thinking. Undoubtedly, the reader can always read other texts with different perspectives or counter-arguments, but if they are written within the poetics of clarity, they remain repressive of pluri-dimensional thought. Certainly, researchers can read texts from outside the domain of the poetics of clarity, but any dominance of the poetics of clarity with its regime of speed may limit thinking within academia.

So far, in my problematising of the regime of speed inherent in the poetics of clarity, I have provisionally assumed a particular mode of reading more or less identical to a disciplined implied reader, who moves through a textual topography respectfully and tactfully, obeying its command and following its sequences.<sup>31</sup> Or similar to what Lyons calls the *normative school-based* reading style, which reads from beginning to ending without distractions.<sup>32</sup> This presupposition of the implied reader as a uniform subjectivity is a general problem within reader-response theory.<sup>33</sup> But it is crucial not to reduce readers to this specific mode of reading, but rather to acknowledge that other modes of reading exist, which can suspend the limitations of a textual topography modelled after a straight line. For example, Enzensberger has described an *anarchic mode of reading* free to use the text in every possible way, i.e. to misunderstand, to skip passages, to leaf back and forward, and to embroider the text with every possible association.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Calinescu has pointed out how *rereading* always shadows the 'normal' linear reading.<sup>35</sup> Thus, reading cannot be controlled even if the textual excess is limited. Perhaps paradoxically, *speed reading* can also undermine the strict textual topographies, because this mode of reading accelerates the movement across the pages, skips past passages, and 'runs' the text, the way one runs traffic lights, thereby attaining a status of autonomy for reading in relation to the text.<sup>36</sup> These different modes of reading are characterised by multifarious temporalities that transgress the chronology inscribed in research articles. The different temporalities of reading may stop abruptly, run through the text, skip passages, and move in circular motions rereading sections over and over again. Hence, we cannot homogenise the temporalities of reading into one simple, unproblematised temporality resembling the chronological line. Reading can always diverge from the line!

Textual consumption is often assumed to be a passive reception without creativity.<sup>37</sup> Iser breaks away from this conception by understanding the text as an event. Yet his characterisation of texts as events solely applies to literature. Admittedly, literary and scientific texts can exercise different degrees of control (just as the different texts within the poetics of clarity exert different degrees of control) but to distinguish sharply presupposes the possibility of a total organisation, which is questionable because every text depends on the activity of reading to be actualised, and thus is temporal and dynamic. Hence, I find it questionable whether we can actually sustain a sharp distinction between reading as passive scanning and as active synthesising. I believe the variety of possible modes of



reading should be enough to reject the idea of a total organisation since reading is always an active movement within a textual topography. We must understand reading as an event even when the reader travels through highly restricted textual topographies such as research articles.

Every reading modifies its object.<sup>38</sup> Since the demise of the time when readers read aloud, the topographical configuration of the text organises the activity of reading less and less.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, it is precisely reading aloud as a mode of reading, where the reader passively follows a textual topography minutely that characterises Phaedrus, who is amid reciting a speech by Lysias when Socrates encounters him at the beginning of the dialogue. If Phaedrus had not met Socrates, perhaps he would have recited the speech all day, without reflecting on its content, thereby passively adopting its claims.<sup>40</sup> This contra-factual possibility exemplifies the danger of writing for Socrates. Socrates' fear of writing is, thus, closely tied to a specific mode of reading. But today, the mobility and autonomy of readers have increased not only when reading literature, but in general: 'whether it is a question of newspapers or Proust, the text has meaning only through its readers; it changes along with them'.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in the digital age, the text has become more unstable and liable to mutate; for example, the reader can search the text.<sup>42</sup> Even though the poetics of clarity subordinates texts and thereby reading a specific order of a velocity of consumption, the reader cannot be controlled at least textually.

Yet although the reader cannot be controlled textually, the poetics of clarity privileges a specific kind of reading subjected to the demand of a fast-paced consumption. This demand of a fast-paced consumption inscribes a regime of speed, which relies on restricted textual topographies limiting the danger of misunderstandings and enabling a swift consumption. Writing is subordinated to a demand for efficiency and must enable the transmission of the content in its purity without distractions. And the duration of reading must be as short as possible to ensure the continued vitality of knowledge production in the age of acceleration. Yet the faster and wider circulation of texts and the demand to be original and up-to-date pressurise the velocity of textual production and consumption, which can accelerate thinking but also become a hindrance. Paradoxically, the attempt to limit distractions through restricted textual topographies can lead to distractions, because researchers may rush from text to text. 'The Internet produces a surplus of ephemeral trivia dominated by "presentism" – the need to be new and up-to-date' and 'encourages a kind of fragmented reading in which the reader rushes distractedly from one short item to another'.<sup>43</sup> Despite the possibility of accelerating thinking, to reduce reading to consumption and put it under the reign of velocity can be disastrous for thinking. Indeed, immense acceleration leads to a shortening of time limits and time to think.<sup>44</sup> Hence, the regime of speed inscribed in the poetics of clarity not merely sets up limits for writing and reading, but also for thinking within academia.

Even though several modes of reading exist that can suspend the regime of speed, the subordination of reading to an ideal of a fast-paced consumption within the poetics of clarity can become a threat to thinking, because thinking takes time but is forced to be energetic and productive within short time constraints.



Thus, part of Socrates' worry can be reformulated: if reading is ideally modelled after a fast-paced consumption of content, a serious risk of undermining reflection exists. Or as Wittgenstein suggests aphoristically:

Thoughts rise to the surface slowly, like bubbles. Sometimes it's as though you could see a thought, as an indistinct point far away on the horizon; and then it often comes closer with surprising speed.<sup>45</sup>

In this aphorism, Wittgenstein poetically expresses the unstable temporality of thinking. Thoughts can rise to the surface slowly but suddenly approach with great velocity. Hence, what is problematic about the regime of speed is not high-speed consumption, but rather when high-speed consumption becomes the dominant ideal. As Wittgenstein also remarks: 'sometimes a sentence can be understood only if it is read at the *right tempo*. My sentences are all to be read *slowly*'.<sup>46</sup> Reading and thinking are always temporal, but the right tempo is not always high-speed. When there is no time for excess, researchers cannot explore new and uncertain perspectives and consequently, thinking risks following its usual habitual patterns. The poetics of clarity can accelerate thinking, but the demand for high-speed can also constrain thinking within academia because it potentially renders thinking repetitive and habitual. Perhaps it is time to produce less and think more.

## Notes

- 1 *Publication Manual of APA*, 3.
- 2 Spencer, *Philosophy of Style*, 11.
- 3 See also Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman, 'Introduction', in *High-Speed Society*, ed. Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 22.
- 4 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'The New Religion-Morality of Speed', in *High-Speed Society*, ed. Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 57.
- 5 Stefan Breuer, 'The Nihilism of Speed: On the Work of Paul Virilio', in *High-Speed Society*, ed. Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 215.
- 6 Breuer, 'The Nihilism of Speed', 222–223.
- 7 Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema* (London: Verso, 1989), 46/*Guerre et cinéma I. Logistique de la perception* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1991), 71.
- 8 Louis Armand, 'Editor's Introduction: Transversions of the Contemporary', in *Contemporary Poetics*, ed. Louis Armand (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), xii–xxx, xiv.
- 9 Marinetti, 'The New Religion-Morality of Speed', 58.
- 10 See Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Culture as the Ideological Battleground of the Modern World-System' in Mike Featherstone (ed.) *Global Culture* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990), 31–56.
- 11 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275d–e.
- 12 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276b.
- 13 Jacques Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon', in *La dissémination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 78.



- 14 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276a.
- 15 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 24.
- 16 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 79.
- 17 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 86–87/*Der Akt des Lesens* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1976), 144–145.
- 18 Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens*, 144–145.
- 19 Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens*, 266.
- 20 Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens*, 319–320.
- 21 Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens*, 7.
- 22 Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens*, 112, 177–179.
- 23 Michel de Certeau, ‘Reading as Poaching’, in *The History of Reading*, ed. Shafquat Towheed, Rosalind Crone, and Katie Halsey (London: Routledge, 2011), 130–140, 133.
- 24 Samuel A. Chambers, ‘Jacques Rancière’, in *From Agamben to Zizek*, ed. Jon Simons (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2011), 197.
- 25 See Rancière, *Le philosophe et ses pauvres* (Paris: Fayard, 1983), particularly part I. See also Philip Watts, ‘Heretical History and the Poetics of Knowledge’, in *Jacques Rancière. Key Concepts*, ed. Jean-Phillippe Deranty (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 104–115, 109.
- 26 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 10/*Le maître ignorant. Cinq leçons sur l’émancipation intellectuelle* (Paris: Fayard, 1987), 20. See also Rancière, ‘Afterword/The Method of Equality’, 276.
- 27 Alison Ross, ‘Expressivity, Literarity, Mute Speech’, in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, ed. Jean-Phillippe Deranty (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 145.
- 28 Marinetti, ‘The New Religion-Morality of Speed’, 58.
- 29 See Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb* (London: Verso, 2005), 2.
- 30 Here I understand heuristics as a method of discovery, i.e. how to find things out (see Andrew Abott, *Methods of Discovery* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2004), 80–81, for more on heuristics). Furthermore, with the limiting of excess, there is a risk that readers may actually only find what they expect.
- 31 See also Armando Petrucci, ‘Reading to Read: A Future for Reading’, in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 362–363.
- 32 Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World* (London; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 196.
- 33 Punday, *Narrative after Deconstruction*, 109.
- 34 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion* (London: Verso, 1992), 11.
- 35 Matei Calinescu, *Rereading* (New Haven, NT and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 19.
- 36 De Certeau, ‘Reading as Poaching’, 137.
- 37 De Certeau, ‘Reading as Poaching’, 131.
- 38 De Certeau, ‘Reading as Poaching’, 133.
- 39 De Certeau, ‘Reading as Poaching’, 137.
- 40 Charles L. Griswold Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1986), 24.
- 41 De Certeau, ‘Reading as Poaching’, 133–134.
- 42 Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World*, 195–196.
- 43 Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World*, 196.
- 44 See also Breuer, ‘The Nihilism of Speed’, 234.
- 45 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 72e.
- 46 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 65e.



# Epilogue

This book is the incarnation of almost a decade of interest in writing. My initial engagement with writing was deeply rooted in philosophy, especially sparked by an encounter with Nietzsche's multifaceted and at times impenetrable styles. This encounter drastically changed my philosophical path from a traditional content-oriented perspective to a meta-reflective interest in writing and the limits for thought. This interest gradually allured me to the margins of the philosophical tradition and beyond. It disrupted the philosophical habitat that had provided my thinking with a safe (although not peaceful) environment. At the margins of philosophy, my interest in clarity was informed by the controversy over the awarding of an honorary degree to Derrida at Cambridge University. Against Derrida, Barry Smith and some other philosophers attacked his candidature. One of the main reasons for contesting Derrida's candidature was his lack of clarity.<sup>1</sup> As Smith in a later interview explained, the attack on Derrida was intended to keep British philosophy healthy and save it from the 'cancerous' spread of Derridian thought.<sup>2</sup> From this clash between ideals of philosophy, I realised that certain writing practices are inherently part of it. Indeed, far from merely an ideal of writing, clarity appeared also to be a potential weapon in a dispute over the borders of philosophy that marked the differences between honesty and deception, between truth and lie.

From this background, my interest in clarity as an ideal of writing and thinking evolved from the esoteric question of writing philosophy to the trans-disciplinary implications of the ideal of clarity more generally. As an intellectual in love, I desired to uncover the entire body of the problematics of clarity in writing and thinking. I wanted to touch every aspect: its historical underpinnings and genealogy, its cultural contexts, its different embodiments in research articles, books, and other forms of writing, its various guises in literature and science, its potential differences across languages, its connections to a broader minimalist aesthetics in art and society, its kinship with journalistic writing, and so on. Yet, I had to control and delimit the problem to be able to go into minute details with the empirical material and theoretical arguments, consequently leaving out a vast woodland of uncharted questions and problems that I strongly encourage future readers to explore. So I delimited the problem to the ideal of clarity operative within the contemporary English speaking academic community represented



by selected empirical material. From this limited perspective, I sketched out the poetics of clarity, and I do not intend to claim that my sketch can be generalised in a straightforward manner. Far from that, I have solely studied a limited amount of texts from selected disciplines that are more or less internally heterogeneous and cannot account for contemporary academia in its entirety. But what my limited perspective can tell us is that the poetics of clarity is operative within the English speaking academic community today not as a universal poetics but as a trans-disciplinary poetics.

What is it then that characterises the trans-disciplinary poetics of clarity? In the first part of the book, I set out to explore this poetics especially its potential trans-disciplinary distribution and characteristics. I show that the poetics of clarity is distributed across disciplinary borders and can be seen as one of the dominant poetics operative within contemporary academia. Yet when we want to determine its characteristics, the picture becomes muddy, because rather than a harmonious space for textual production the poetics of clarity unfolds as a multi-dimensional field of tension. Perhaps paradoxically, within the poetics of clarity, the ideal of clarity is anything but clear. For example, at the idealised plane, a rift exists between privileging the text–reader relationship (readability) and the text–world relationship (precision). Despite these tensions, however, certain linguistic prescriptions or proper ways of exposition are shared with varying degrees across disciplinary borders with the exception of literary studies (which appears to operate outside the logic of the poetics of clarity). Keeping the tensions, variations, and divergences in mind, the proper poetics of clarity entails a privileging of direct ideational language use incarnated in declarative sentences in opposition to poetic language use, an ambivalent effacement of the researchers-in-the-texts through a virtue of disengaged engagement, and a demand for linear progression of one main argument through an interplay between textual atomism and logical succession. With the trans-disciplinary dispersion of the poetics of clarity, contemporary academic writing can be understood as a (tacit) response to and negotiation with these increasingly standardised demands of properness.

In my exploration of the poetics of clarity, I have produced a complex picture of correlations, resemblances, tensions, divergences, and transgressions. Now one way to proceed could have been to attempt to homogenise the concept of clarity to mark out a future path for academic writing. This would, however, probably end with yet another writing guide pleading for a specific and selective version of clarity. In the second part of the book, I chose another path. Instead of normatively delimiting the possibilities for writing, I explored the potential constraints on thinking residing within the poetics of clarity. More specifically, the possible consequences of the poetics of clarity for thinking within academia today. My reflections circulate around the argument that the poetics of clarity is a *productive constraint*.

The poetics of clarity is a highly productive space for knowledge production enabling accessible knowledge and high-speed circulation. Yet while it may be a productive space for revealing specific findings, it is also a highly selective space co-producing opaqueness. Clarity not only uncovers but also covers up because



there is no neutral language (not even the zero style) nor impersonal perspective (not even the apparently dead knowing subject) nor natural template (not even the teleological linearity of progressing one main argument) through which we can uncover the world. As I have shown, the demands inherent in the poetics of clarity may risk expelling crucial components in knowledge production such as metaphors, contexts, biases and interests, multi-dimensional arguments, messy descriptions of reality, and errors. Thus, beneath its apparently innocent façade as topic-neutral lies a selective and restrictive framework for knowledge production excluding alternate approaches that do not fit and privileging research that conforms with certain characteristics of positivism and demands of high-speed consumption. While it is crucial to remember that the poetics of clarity is not a uniform space for knowledge production and that it is possible to escape its limitations, the tendency of increased standardisation within contemporary academia may be problematic because it risks enclosing thinking within boundaries that are too strict.

When clarity is selective and restrictive, it may be highly productive as a standardised medium for knowledge production, but if it gains hegemony as a standardised presentational monism, it may entail not only vitality but also the potential demise of thinking. In the heart of the poetics of clarity operates a negative dialectic between securing the vitality of thinking by enabling circulation and leading to its demise by excluding crucial parts of knowledge production: clarity is not a matter of life *or* death, but a matter of life *and* death.

## Notes

- 1 Barry Smith, 'Derrida Degree: A Question of Honour', *The Times*, no. 9 (1992).
- 2 Barry Smith and Jeffrey Sims, 'Revisiting The Derrida Affair with Barry Smith', *Sophia* 38, no. 2 (1999): 142–169, 156.



# Appendix I

## A note on Rancière's poetics of knowledge

Rancière's concept of a *poetics of knowledge* has played a formative role in my development of the idea for this book. In this appendix, I will elaborate the conception. However, before I describe Rancière's poetics of knowledge, a brief proviso. Rancière's work is vast and diverse. With this diversity comes a variety of styles. Characteristic of *Les noms de l'histoire*, where Rancière formulates his conception of a poetics of knowledge for the first time, is that his analysis of historical writing takes place within an interlocution between empirical material and conceptual thinking. Consequently, there is no readymade theoretical framework that can be transposed to other contexts. Indeed, Rancière's texts function as a fluid space for thinking between concepts and empirical material.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly emphasised by the style in which it (at times) becomes impossible to separate Rancière's voice from the voices of his sources.<sup>2</sup> These two difficulties – the particular situational context of his interlocutions, and the uncertainty of Rancière's position – entail that Rancière's development of a poetics of knowledge cannot be taken as a static conceptual framework that can be transposed to other contexts and that any generalisations are products of my reading, which is inherently a dislocation.<sup>3</sup>

In *Les noms de l'histoire*, Rancière unfolds, what he designates as a poetics of knowledge in his study of the poetic dimensions of historical writing. Rancière argues that the revolution of history as a science, which occurred in France after the Second World War, presupposed a poetic revolution.<sup>4</sup> It is within this context that Rancière explicitly describes his study of the poetics of knowledge:

Such a study falls under what I have chosen to call a *poetics of knowledge*, a study of the set of literary procedures by which a discourse escapes literature, gives itself the status of a science and signifies this status. The poetics of knowledge has an interest in the rules according to which knowledge is written and read, is constituted as a specific genre of discourse. It attempts to define the mode of truth to which such knowledge is devoted – not to provide norms for it, nor to validate or invalidate its scientific pretence. It doubtless concerns those so-called human or social sciences that, for centuries, have tried with varying amounts of luck to win their place in the accord of the true sciences, to remove the interminable suspicion that they still belong to the works of literature or politics, even to both at the same time.<sup>5</sup>



The formulation above is one of the very few passages where Rancière explicates his conception of a *poetics of knowledge* (*poétique du savoir*). In the quotation, a poetics of knowledge is generally characterised as a study of how knowledge is written (and read).<sup>6</sup> Here I will focus on four important characteristics of the poetics of knowledge that are expressed in or related to the quotation: first, the poetics of knowledge appears to be descriptive, yet is also critical and polemical; second, it concerns literary procedures and rules that marks a discourse as knowledge; third, it is not merely about writing as a secondary activity but concerns the constitution of knowledge and relates to the thinkable; and fourth, from the outset, it is delimited to the human and social sciences, but it can be broadened to concern knowledge production in general. I will now sketch out these characteristics in more detail.

First, in the above formulation Rancière stresses that a poetics of knowledge is not an attempt to provide norms for knowledge production. Furthermore, the poetics of knowledge is not an attempt to validate or invalidate the scientific pretence of a given discourse. Instead of focusing on the truth or falsity of texts, Rancière directs his analysis towards the way they are written. This direction of the analytical gaze runs parallel with Barthes' description of poetics as not a science of contents, but of the conditions for the content, i.e. as a science of forms.<sup>7</sup> As Rancière also points out, his work on the poetics of knowledge is indebted to Barthes. But when the poetics of knowledge is set to analyse rules of composition, it may appear to be a descriptive project. Indeed, according to White, Rancière is not attempting to dissolve the boundaries between science and literature and assign the status of fiction to history.<sup>8</sup> But perhaps the poetics of knowledge is not as innocently descriptive as White claims. This has been argued by Davis, who points out that Rancière's analysis of the rhetoric of the *Annales school* functions as a critique of its claim to *scientificity*.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Watts describes the main object of *Les noms de l'histoire* as challenging the scientific approach to historiography.<sup>10</sup> Thus, rather than being a merely descriptive enterprise that elucidates the poetics of a given discipline without judgement, the poetics of knowledge can be seen as inherently critical and polemical. The critical and polemical dimensions of the poetics of knowledge are explicitly visible in a later reformulation of the poetics of knowledge where Rancière describes how it crosses established boundaries between disciplines to challenge hierarchies of knowledge production.<sup>11</sup>

Second, a poetics of knowledge concerns the constitution of a discourse as scientific and the specific literary procedures involved in its constitution. The literary procedures Rancière particularly studies are the use of tense and person in the verb, the style of sentences and the play between the literal and the figurative.<sup>12</sup> The constitution Rancière describes is related to an escape from being categorised as literature, which paradoxically is made possible through a set of literary procedures. In *Les noms de l'histoire*, the escape from literature particularly concerns history as a discipline and its uncertain position between literature and science. According to Rancière, history *as science* produces its difference from history *as a narrative* in a narrative.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Rancière assumes that a certain set of literary procedures are at work: in the demarcation of a



discourse from categorisation as literature, and in establishing and maintaining the scientific status of a discourse. Rancière's assumption that a set of literary procedures function in the demarcation of a discourse as knowledge follows the idea that a set of rules guides the production of knowledge. Such rules and conventions determine what will be recognised and accepted as knowledge. These rules concern how knowledge is written and define specific literary procedures that constitute a discourse as knowledge. This assumption links the study of the poetics of knowledge with the thinkable because it plays a constitutive role in the production of knowledge.

Third, the poetics of knowledge is not solely about the writing of knowledge as a secondary activity of knowledge production but concerns how knowledge is constituted and the specific literary procedures involved in its constitution. In this way, literary procedures are more than a mere secondary medium of knowledge production. For example, the poetic revolution of historical writing that Rancière describes is not simply about finding a more persuasive way of writing. Rather, the poetic revolution is related to the thinkable: 'the question of the poetic form according to which history can be written is then strictly tied to that of the mode of historicity according to which its objects are thinkable'.<sup>14</sup> When the scope of a poetics of knowledge is specified as concerning the making of knowledge and the question of the thinkable, it resonates with Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*, where Foucault describes the historical a priori regulating and organising knowledge production at different times.<sup>15</sup> What this entails is that different poetics can alter the appearance of the past. Here Rancière's study of the poetics of historical knowledge runs parallel with Barthes' analysis of how different modes of historical narration expose the past events in different ways.<sup>16</sup> Yet the connection between poetic form and the thinkable entails that different poetics not merely represent but constitute the past in different ways, thereby changing what is visible for the historian. As Rancière points out, poetics in this sense concerns more than rhetoric: 'it is not a question of rhetorical turns of phrase, but of poetics of knowledge'.<sup>17</sup> This distinction between rhetoric and poetics finds a contemporary resonance in Hallin's *Les structures rhétoriques de la science*, where he distinguishes between a rhetorical analysis of ways of persuasion, and a poetical perspective (which Hallin designates as a *profound rhetoric*), which sets out to discover the processes of invention and the hidden literary traces.<sup>18</sup> The poetics of science presented by Hallin runs parallel with Rancière's understanding of poetics as the study of the literary procedures involved in the *making* of knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

The fourth characteristic I wish to emphasise is that in his initial description, Rancière seemingly describes the poetics of knowledge as concerning the human and social sciences, and their attempt to constitute themselves as 'true' sciences. In contrast, other authors have shown how it is productive to employ a broad perspective in the analysis of scientific discourses. For example, in *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault studies the formations guiding knowledge production at different times; in *Les structures rhétoriques de la science*, Hallin argues that the analysis of literary compositional structures is not limited to a specific field of expression; and in *Poetologien des Wissens um 1800*, Vogl historically examines



how knowledge is organised in science, literature, and the arts.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, within the sociology of knowledge, it has been pointed out that the production of knowledge is part of a wider social and cultural context.<sup>21</sup> However, in his description of a poetics of knowledge as a *method of equality* that focuses on the common capacities in language to invent objects, stories, and arguments, Rancière moves his poetics of knowledge beyond disciplinary boundaries.<sup>22</sup> This is, for example, emphasised when Rancière claims, 'No well-defined boundary separates the discourse of the woodworker who is the object of science from the discourse of science itself'.<sup>23</sup> This statement emphasises the transgressive potential of the poetics of knowledge and makes it relevant to all disciplines. Or rather, it must work as an *indisciplinary procedure* ignoring disciplinary boundaries and hierarchies to open a potential space of equality.<sup>24</sup>

To briefly reformulate the main tenets of the poetics of knowledge that forms the horizon for my exploration of the poetics of clarity: the poetics of knowledge is not about the truth or falsity of any given text nor is it an interpretative procedure to elucidate meaning, rather it is a polemical description of the rules according to which knowledge is written and the specific literary procedures involved in the constitution of knowledge. The poetics of knowledge is inherently critical and polemical because it opens a trans-disciplinary perspective that challenges established and automated hierarchies between discourses or disciplines. From the beginning, the human and social sciences are conceived as an equal with the natural sciences – no initial hierarchy is inserted. Furthermore, the link between writing procedures and the thinkable opens a critical questioning of the consequences of a given poetics for thinking.

### **Problems and tensions in the heart of Rancière's poetics of knowledge**

So far, I have explicated Rancière's concept rather uncritically. Now I will discuss some weaknesses and potential criticisms. Rancière's work has been criticised from various sides, but here I will only focus on problems that are directly relevant to the poetics of knowledge.

*The perspective of a poetics of knowledge turns science into fiction.* To claim that a set of literary procedures are at work in the constitution of a discourse as scientific could appear as a devastating claim, which destabilises scientific authority by abolishing a clear-cut distinction between science and literature. Seen from the outside, studying the poetics of scientific writing in terms of literary procedures and rules of genre may *per se* appear as an invalidation of the scientificity of a discipline. However, in his early formulation of a poetics of knowledge, Rancière explicitly points out that the aim is neither to show that the disciplines are false knowledge nor to invalidate their scientific premise. In line with his early formulation, in 'Thinking Between Disciplines', Rancière restates that a poetics of knowledge is not about claiming that disciplines are false knowledge nor that there is always literature in rigorous argumentation.<sup>25</sup> However, as I have argued, despite Rancière's apparently innocent description, the poetics of knowledge is



used to uncover norms and potentially challenge their validity. However, this does not entail that science is turned into literature. Inside the scope of a poetics of knowledge, it is important to stress that it is not about showing that scientific writing is literature, but rather about how particular poetic principles can function in the constitution of knowledge and how they may demarcate the thinkable.

*A poetics of knowledge is a parasite caught inside the discourses it analyses.* A poetics of knowledge is tied to the production of knowledge as a second-order reflection that feasts upon other texts as a parasite inside a body. This aspect of the poetics of knowledge resembles a central part of Derrida's *deconstruction*, which as a consequence of residing at the edge of metaphysics needs the resources it deconstructs.<sup>26</sup> According to Rorty, Derrida is forever trapped within the system he is trying to deconstruct.<sup>27</sup> But for Derrida, it would be naïve to think as Rorty that it is possible to place oneself outside of metaphysics altogether in order to judge it from an outside view.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, a poetics of knowledge has this duality: it feeds on the texts it analyses, but also has a critical potential to challenge dominant hierarchies and support multiplicity. So, a poetics of knowledge is indeed parasitic, but the question is whether this is really a problem or if it would indeed be naïve to think that it is possible to transform a poetics from the outside? However, the question of the parasitical nature of a poetics of knowledge opens a dimension of self-reflexivity: what happens if a poetics of knowledge is turned against itself (as a third-order reflection)? This has also been pointed out by Derrida in the context of deconstruction, which runs the risk of falling prey to its own work.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, when a poetics of knowledge is carried out within the standards of academia, it necessarily contains the potential for its own demise.

*A poetics of knowledge is in danger of overly generalising in its move from textual analysis to the level of poetic regimes.* This problem has been posed by Davis, who criticises Rancière's poetics of knowledge for elucidating a poetics from a surface textual analysis of a few canonised works.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, there is a possible gap between the concrete level of textual analysis and the level of a generalised poetics of knowledge. If a poetics of knowledge relies on a few consecrated texts, it risks overgeneralising and thereby loses its sensitivity towards the empirical material. This problem is also related to a question posed by Méchoulan in the context of Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics: 'what happens if we step aside and choose other names and other ways of making historical intertwinings visible?'<sup>31</sup> In other words, if a different choice of texts and names alters our picture, the poetic regime may not be generalisable beyond the concrete texts. By moving from a level of textual analysis to a general level of poetics, Rancière relies on the synecdoche as a trope of thought that lets him move from instances of knowledge production to descriptions of poetics. A similar problem is found in Foucault's elucidation of the *epistemes* guiding knowledge production at different times. But in contrast to Foucault, in *Les noms de l'histoire*, Rancière does not claim that there is a general system of knowledge. Rather, several poetics may be at work at the same time. Furthermore, a given poetics is not necessarily unified but can be contradictory.<sup>32</sup> Hence, the exposition of poetic regimes is always



finite, and there is always the possibility of different competing poetics. Yet, the problem of generalisation remains important to bear in mind, and I do not believe that Rancière provides a plausible way out.

*A poetics of knowledge takes the existence of a set of rules guiding knowledge production for granted.* Rancière presupposes the existence of a set of rules at work in the constitution of a text as knowledge. Likewise, in *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault also presupposes the existence of the regularity he is searching for.<sup>33</sup> However, in my exploration of the poetics of clarity, the existence of rules of academic writing is not merely presupposed, because the extensive masses of documents under the headers 'authorial guidelines' and 'manuals of style' indicate the existence of rules from the outset and the extensive (attempted) regulation of academic writing. Thus, the existence of rules regulating academic writing is self-evident. Rather, than figuring out if there are rules, it is about figuring out what the rules are, how they may be operative or differ across disciplinary borders, and how they are related to actual texts.

*A poetics of knowledge suffers from conceptual vagueness.* As Badiou has pointed out, Rancière's texts often function as a fluid space for thinking between concepts and empirical material.<sup>34</sup> Even though Rancière explicitly defines what a poetics of knowledge is, the definition, as well as his analysis of the poetics of historical knowledge, rely on a set of concepts that are used without specification or theoretical foundation. For example, Rancière uses the concept of *discourse* with at least four different meanings in *Les noms de l'histoire*. The disadvantage of this fluid and ambiguous use of concepts is that Rancière risks being misunderstood and that it can become uncertain what he is studying and claiming. Nonetheless, the strength of a fluid use of concepts is that there is no readymade theoretical framework that can be transposed to other contexts. Thus, the fluidity can ensure that a poetics of knowledge remains sensitive to the empirical material, instead of resting on a contextually detached theoretical viewpoint with pre-defined concepts. The inherent fluidity of Rancière's work entails that concepts are closely related to an empirical context, which means that the appropriation of a poetics of knowledge to another empirical context will inevitably transform it. My exploration of the poetics of clarity is precisely such a transformation.

## Notes

- 1 Indeed, Badiou describes Rancière's style as 'a conceptual unfolding of examples with the goal of creating certain zones of undecidability between actuality and concept' (Alain Badiou, 'The Lessons of Jacques Rancière: Knowledge and Power after the Storm', in *Jacques Rancière. History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2009), 45).
- 2 This difficulty is present in many of Rancière's writings, but particularly pronounced in *Le maître ignorant*. This has also been pointed out by Swenson, who describes Rancière's style as a free indirect discourse: 'a third-person narration of reported speech or thought, capable of a smooth melding with exterior narration of actions and description of scenes, distinguished by the erasure of certain marking effects' (James Swenson, 'Style indirect libre', in *Jacques Rancière. History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2009), 263). Even though Rancière



- cites his sources, what is particularly characteristic of his style is that he reduces the marks of differentiation between his own voice and the voices of his sources (Swenson, 'Style indirect libre', 264). However, for the sake of simplicity, I will continue to ascribe the viewpoints expressed in texts authored by Rancière to Rancière.
- 3 Indeed, Rancière's own work provides a background for this way of reading: 'and experience seemed to teach me that the power of a mode of thinking has to do above all with its capacity to be displaced, just as the power of a piece of music may derive from its capacity to be played on different instruments'. (Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2004), xxviii/*Le philosophe et ses pauvres*, 13).
  - 4 Rancière, *Les noms de l'histoire*, 12.
  - 5 Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History. On the Poetics of Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 8/*Les noms de l'histoire*, 21–22.
  - 6 This dimension is missing from Rancière's analysis of historical discourse. Of course, it could be argued that reading is necessarily always already tied to writing. Yet it remains explicitly unthematized.
  - 7 Roland Barthes, *Critique et vérité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 57.
  - 8 Hayden White, 'Foreword: Rancière's Revisionism', in *The Names of History. On the Poetics of Knowledge*, by Jacques Rancière (Minneapolis, MN; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xii.
  - 9 Oliver Davis, *Jacques Rancière* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 58.
  - 10 Watts, 'Heretical history and the poetics of knowledge', 104.
  - 11 Rancière, 'Thinking between disciplines', 11.
  - 12 See Rancière, *Les noms de l'histoire*, 180.
  - 13 Rancière, *Les noms de l'histoire*, 12.
  - 14 Rancière, *The Names of History*, 101/*Les noms de l'histoire*, 203–204.
  - 15 Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 13.
  - 16 Barthes, 'Le discours de l'histoire', 153.
  - 17 Rancière, *The Names of History*, 14/*Les noms de l'histoire*, 34.
  - 18 Fernand Halpin, *Les structures rhétoriques de la science* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), 12.
  - 19 See also Braungart for a general formulation of poetics as concerning the *making* of science (Georg Braungart, 'The Poetics of Nature: Literature and Constructive Imagination in the History of Geology', in *Inventions of the Imagination*, ed. Richard T. Gray et al. (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2011), 29).
  - 20 See Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 13; Halpin, *Les structures rhétoriques de la science*, 13; and Mary Helen Dupree and Sean B. Franzel, 'Introduction: Performing Knowledge, 1750–1850', in *Performing Knowledge, 1750–1850*, ed. Mary Helen Dupree and Sean B. Franzel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 10.
  - 21 See e.g. McCarthy, *Knowledge as Culture*; and Mulkay, *Science and the Sociology of Knowledge*.
  - 22 Rancière, 'Thinking Between Disciplines', 11–12. The operation of equality in the heart of Rancière's poetics of knowledge is also described by him in an interview, where he states that a poetics of knowledge is an operation on the objects of knowledge and the modes of knowing that brings them to the level of common language (Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia, 'Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière', *Diacritics* 30, no. 2 (2000), 116).
  - 23 Rancière, 'Thinking Between Disciplines', 11.
  - 24 Rancière, 'Thinking Between Disciplines', 9.
  - 25 Rancière, 'Thinking Between Disciplines', 11–12.
  - 26 Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 442–443.
  - 27 Richard Rorty, 'Two Meanings of "Logocentrism": A Reply to Norris', in *Redrawing the Lines: Analytic Philosophy, Deconstruction, and Literary Theory*, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 208.



- 28 Jacques Derrida, 'La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines', in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 411–413.
- 29 Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 39.
- 30 Davis, *Jacques Rancière*, 59–60.
- 31 Méchoulán, 'Sophisticated Continuities and Historical Discontinuities, Or, Why Not Protagoras?', 60.
- 32 I am grateful to Gabriel Rockhill for pointing this out.
- 33 See Ernesto Laclau, 'Discourse', in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. Robert Godin and Philip Pettit, vol. 1999 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 436; and Han, *Foucault's Critical Project*, 40.
- 34 Badiou, 'The Lessons of Jacques Rancière: Knowledge and Power after the Storm', 45.



# Appendix II

## A note on methods

Here I will present the empirical material I have selected, and how I analysed it. However, I do not intend to explicate something akin to a rigorous methodological framework, because one crucial aspect from Rancière's poetics of knowledge that informs my analytical approach is to remain sensitive to the material. I will, however, present choices and analytical perspectives that form my analyses. Yet these choices and perspectives have their point of emergence in an unstable encounter with the empirical material. Consequently, the empirical material has partially formed the methodological procedures. I will begin by describing the empirical material that constitutes the basis for my exploration of the poetics of clarity before I describe the multiple analytical perspectives I have applied.

### Empirical material

The material I have chosen as the basis for my exploration of the poetics of clarity consists of authorial guidelines, manuals of style, general writing guides, and research articles from different disciplines. To begin with, I delimited the scope of my empirical material to academic journals that publish research articles, because of their central position in contemporary academia as one of the dominant forms of communication. I further limited the scope of my selection to include only journals in English. First, because English has become the international language of science. Indeed, at no other time in the history of the scientific article has one language dominated to this extent.<sup>1</sup> And second, because the comparative perspective would be much more difficult to develop across languages, since it would possibly move the focus away from the comparative trans-disciplinary discussion in the direction of a discussion of the differences between languages, which would indeed be very interesting but would make it much more difficult to draw any conclusions concerning contemporary academic writing.

To narrow down the basis for selecting the empirical material, I chose 50 journals from four different disciplines (ten from each of the following disciplines: neuroscience, sociology, literary studies, and philosophy) as well as ten of the top ranking academic journals in the world. The journals within each discipline were selected based on impact factor. Within each discipline, I selected five high- and five low-ranked journals. I chose to represent both high- and low-impact journals



within each discipline to be able to examine possible tensions and dispersions in writing practices and ideals, and identify potential patterns across disciplines or ranking. Since the empirical material that I could analyse was limited, I sought variation (in disciplines and ranking) in my selection. To begin with, I chose ten of the top ranking journals in the world, because I expected that the ideals of academic writing would be particularly pronounced in these journals. Then, I chose disciplines so natural science (neuroscience), social science (sociology), and the humanities (literary studies) would all be represented to explore the distribution of ideals of academic writing in diverse settings and potential variances and divergences. Finally, I chose to include philosophy, because of a personal interest in analysing my own discipline.

From each of the selected journals, I collected the most recent authorial guidelines as well as one randomly selected research article. While the authorial guidelines were assembled to provide a basis for an analysis of the explicit rules and ideals of academic writing, the research articles were selected to provide a basis for a textual analysis of actual writing procedures. I chose to select articles randomly because to sketch out a general poetics it is not enough to treat a few seminal works. Furthermore, I chose to include six influential manuals of style as well as four general writing guides to supplement the analysis of explicit rules and ideals of academic writing, because of the (at times) sparse descriptions and explications of rules and ideals of writing in the authorial guidelines. I have specifically chosen to focus on the general writing guides mentioned most often in the authorial guidelines and manuals of style differentiated between disciplines. My strategy for selecting the empirical material was a combination of targeted selection (in terms of disciplines and ranking) and random selection (in terms of specific articles).<sup>2</sup> I have chosen a variety of sources because I believe that it is crucial to explore the various parts of the ecosystem in which the poetics of clarity may reside (for a detailed list of sources see the 'Empirical material' section in the 'Works cited').<sup>3</sup>

In my selection of the journals, I relied on *Scimago* (H index and SJR values) from 2013 ([www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php](http://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php)). The rankings were crosschecked with *Google Scholar* in order to make sure that the rankings were somewhat representative ([https://scholar.google.com/citations?view\\_op=top\\_venues](https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=top_venues)). When there were marked differences between rankings, some journals were chosen from *Scimago*, while others were chosen from *Google Scholar* to make sure that at least some top and low ranking journals of a discipline were included. I do not assume, however, that the rankings give a full picture of the top and low ranking journals of a discipline. I fully acknowledge that the rankings may be highly problematic as a general ranking of journals within a discipline, e.g. because of sub-disciplinary niches. This is particularly the case in disciplines such as literary studies and philosophy where the difference between top and bottom is much less pronounced than in, e.g. neuroscience. Furthermore, it could be objected that many journals are not part of these lists and they could perhaps present interesting alternatives. Yet because I am exploring the general poetics of scientific writing, I have chosen to rely on these rankings because they list



journals that are (presumably) part of this general poetics. However, at times the rankings also included journals that did not appear to fit within the specific discipline I wanted to analyse because some of the rankings were based on broader categories. In cases where a specific journal was from a different discipline, I chose to select the next journal on the list. Moreover, some journals are published by the same publisher and often share the same authorial guidelines. This is particularly the case with Elsevier. When a journal within a specific discipline shares the same authorial guidelines with another journal, I have chosen to select another journal to represent the field broadly, rather than explore, e.g. Elsevier's poetics. However, when overlapping authorial guidelines appear in journals from different disciplines, I have chosen to include both journals, because it tells us something about the trans-disciplinary standardisation of scientific writing.

Against my intention to open a comparative trans-disciplinary exploration of the poetics of clarity, it could be objected that my selection of empirical material relied on the *discipline* as a category as well as scientific hierarchies.<sup>4</sup> This may appear to be in direct opposition to my aim to adopt an interdisciplinary procedure, which ignores disciplinary boundaries and hierarchies. However, precisely in order to open a trans-disciplinary perspective, I begin with a concept such as the discipline: to overcome disciplinary silos and develop a broader egalitarian perspective, I draw out certain writing practices comfortably resting within each discipline and submit them to a comparative scrutiny that may or may not unfold similarities but, at least, may destabilise the borders between disciplines.

Finally, a brief note on the presentation of my interpretations: I tend to lump together the different material I draw on because otherwise the designation would entail a long string of nouns, e.g. 'the authorial guidelines, manuals of style, and writing guides'. These have been lumped together under the general label 'the guidelines'. Moreover, I eventually write the 'humanities' instead of 'literary studies and philosophy' and 'social science' to refer to writing guides that cover broader fields than sociology. Yet my use of general categories such as 'philosophy' or even worse 'the humanities' has the negative consequence that my interpretations appear more general than they are. Thus, I want to stress that when I use such designations, my interpretations solely concern the empirical material I have analysed and do not necessarily account for the writing practices of a whole discipline or set of disciplines. Thus, I do not claim that my interpretations can be generalised straightforwardly.

### *Analytical perspectives*

In my analysis, I apply multiple analytical perspectives that are adapted to the different types of material and altogether aiming at sketching out the poetics of clarity. Rather, than relying on a few consecrated texts, my choice of material together with the multiple analytical perspectives are intended to explore the poetics of clarity from diverse viewpoints. While my empirical material can be roughly divided into guidelines and research articles, my analytical perspectives can likewise be divided into a conceptual analysis focusing on the ideals of academic



writing explicitly formulated in the guidelines, and a multi-dimensional textual analysis focusing on the writing procedures in the selected research articles. These complementary analytical perspectives enable me to discuss the prevalence and potential trans-disciplinary distribution of the poetics of clarity and disciplinary variances. Now I will describe the analytical perspectives.

*A conceptual analysis of the idealised plane of poetics* forms my entry point into the exploration of the poetics of clarity. I have chosen to begin my exploration with a conceptual analysis of the guidelines because of their explicit and practical nature. In a way, the poetics I intend to explore is already formulated as the vast amounts of guidelines attest to. Yet, closer scrutiny of the guidelines and the specific ideals of academic writing reveals a range of indeterminate concepts and tensions. Indeed, what struck me in the conceptual analysis of the ideal of clarity was that even though the concept of clarity occupies a central position in the guidelines, this concept is anything but clear and its meaning is largely determined through connections with other concepts.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, I analysed the ideal of clarity as functioning in a conceptual network, rather than seeking to determine its intrinsic meaning. Hence, a central part of the analytical work involved analysing the meaning of concepts by relating them to their cognate concepts. Altogether, the guidelines are analysed to sketch out how the fluid concepts are interrelated and may interweave a conceptual network of ideals for academic writing. However, even though my analysis of the conceptual network may produce a sketch of the poetics of clarity, it is important to bear in mind that it is solely a sketch of an idealised plane and does not necessarily depict academic writing in practice.

*A multi-dimensional textual analysis* complements my conceptual analysis with crucial nuances, variations, and differences. However, the two analytical perspectives are not without relation, because the conceptual analysis produces a preliminary sketch of the poetics of clarity that forms my textual analysis, which, however, does not merely follow the initial sketch, but also differentiates it. In the intersection between the different analytical perspectives runs a dual stream between poetic ideals and singular texts that resembles the crucial tension I have described in Rancière's poetics of knowledge.

Furthermore, the textual analysis is characterised by a double suspension. Following Rancière's formulation of a poetics of knowledge, sketching out a poetics is not about meaning but about rules and conventions of language use. So an analysis of poetics focuses on the linguistic medium and from the outset suspends a transcendent reading that searches for meaning and truth.<sup>6</sup> Besides the suspension of a transcendent reading, I also employ a second suspension, namely a suspension of discipline-specific idiosyncrasies such as the use of figures, tables, models, quotations, etc. I employ this secondary suspension following Rancière's emphasis on the common capacity of language as a resource to bring the potentially shared resources of a common language into view. I do not claim that such discipline-specific idiosyncrasies are without importance, but the suspension functions as a way to enable the trans-disciplinary perspective and let self-given disciplinary differences remain in the background in my focus on a potentially



shared set of poetic possibilities and variations within these possibilities. When I focus on poetic possibilities and variations in the research articles, I am paying attention to the linguistic medium and specifically how conventional literary procedures are visible (or not) as patterns in the articles.

To explore the textual patterns, I employ multiple methodological perspectives that enable me to explore the poetics of clarity from various perspectives and textual levels. The patterns will be unfolded through a combination of *close readings* and an *explorative quantitative textual analysis*.<sup>7</sup>

In the *close readings*, I analyse textual patterns and significant details in nine research articles in relation to the sketch of the poetics of clarity developed at the idealised plane. Yet an inherent problem with close reading is that it is a time-consuming reading strategy usually delimited to a small number of texts.<sup>8</sup> Thus, to expand the scope of my analysis and not get carried away by what could be spurious general patterns, an explorative quantitative textual analysis complements my close readings.<sup>9</sup>

The *explorative quantitative textual analysis* is based on computational analyses of the text corpus consisting of 50 research articles. I have primarily used the software *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC)* to explore textual patterns specifically grammatical categories, but I also employed the word frequency count in *NVIVO* to supplement the analysis, because it allowed me to search the texts intentionally for phrases and formulations. My explorative quantitative analysis is related to what Moretti calls *distant reading*, which is a way to focus on units smaller or larger than the texts, e.g. linguistic devices (smaller) or systems (larger).<sup>10</sup> Moretti describes this perspective as a way to learn *not* to read texts.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps then it would be appropriate to describe my explorative quantitative analysis as a method of *non-reading*. While reading is traditionally connected to interpretation, the non-reading approach produces data based on the texts.<sup>12</sup>

The explorative quantitative textual analysis helps me to determine the prevalence and differences of textual patterns at a more general level than in the close readings. Indeed, as Jockers has pointed out, quantitative textual analyses extend our range of perception beyond ordinary reading practices and produce more comprehensive pictures of general tendencies and patterns.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the non-reading perspective not merely enables the ultimate suspension of the transcendent reading, but also tones down the inherent bias in my close readings formed by my background in the humanities, which could entail a misrepresentation of particularly the natural science texts. In this way, the non-reading perspective supports the possibility of equality across the texts and disciplines. Yet, the word frequencies produced by the computer-based analyses are decontextualised and thus, the close readings play a crucial role in making sense of the data.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the close reading and non-reading perspectives are not antagonistic, but rather complementary.<sup>15</sup>

My textual analysis operates simultaneously at three levels: first, an intra-textual level, where I search for patterns within a text (from the close reading perspective); second, a macro-textual level, where I analyse the potential patterns within the larger textual corpus (from the non-reading perspective); third,



an inter-textual level, where I compare the characteristics of the different texts and analyse similarities and differences of patterns. These different levels of textual analysis will inform and transform my initial sketch of the poetics of clarity drawn from the idealised plane and indicate the characteristics, variations, distributions, and prevalence of the poetics of clarity in contemporary academic writing. These multiple analytical perspectives are constantly complementing and cross-fertilising each other in my search for textual patterns. However, there are (at least) two complications when searching for textual patterns: it is potentially endless, and it is difficult to determine significance and prevalence.

First, to analyse textual patterns is a potentially endless task. As Leech and Short have argued, every analysis rests on a selection of categories.<sup>16</sup> I have restricted my perspective to specific dimensions of language use that have appeared as central for the poetics of clarity. This entails that my sketch of the poetics of clarity is merely a partial construct. The dimensions I focused on were chosen based on my preliminary conceptual analysis. These dimensions also resemble some of the dimensions that Rancière analyses in his poetics of knowledge, specifically the style of sentences (sentence types and word choice) and authorial positioning (pronouns and voice). In addition, I have also focused on textual organisation because this dimension is highly standardised within the poetics of clarity. However, in the analysis of the textual organisation, neither the close reading nor the non-reading perspectives proved suitable. Instead, exploring this dimension called for a kind of speed reading or skimming of all 50 research articles to assess their general structure.

Second, not only is the search for textual patterns a potentially endless task but it is almost always possible to find textual patterns.<sup>17</sup> So what do we look for in our search for patterns? One possible answer might be prevalence. The question of prevalence is in a sense a foundation for any textual patterns because a pattern presupposes iteration of sequences. However, it is important to realise that the analysis of textual patterns is a highly selective and partial textual patterning. My selection of textual patterns to explore is largely informed by my previous readings of the guidelines and close readings, and thus, I do not assume that the textual patterns I analyse are the only significant patterns. Furthermore, significance cannot solely be based on quantification, because even though such a move might produce patterns, these may be accidental or unimportant. At least from a qualitative perspective, there may be passages that are more crucial to notice than others. The characteristics of such passages may be blurred through quantification (e.g. relying on non-segmented averages of texts as a whole). Moreover, sometimes it is not the quantified mean that is most interesting but precisely deviations and particularities. Hence, I have found that a methodological interplay between close reading and quantitative exploration was the most fruitful way to explore the poetics of clarity.

From these multiple analytical perspectives on the variety of empirical material, I produce a sketch of the poetics of clarity that is not always coherent but unfolds it as a multi-dimensional field of tension.



## Notes

- 1 Gross, Harmon, and Reidy, *Communicating Science*, 163.
- 2 Annulla Linders, 'Documents, Texts, and Archives in Constructionist Research', in *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, ed. James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (New York, NY; London: The Guilford Press, 2008), 475.
- 3 This runs parallel with Jocker's point that literature must be studied in an aggregated ecosystem, rather than in a few seminal works (Matthew Lee Jockers, *Macroanalysis, Digital Methods and Literary History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 32).
- 4 As Foucault has argued, disciplines cannot be understood as stable, but are rather relative and mobile (see *L'ordre du discours*, 31).
- 5 The tendency to leave central concepts undefined is particularly widespread in the authorial guidelines. Hence, the analysis of manuals of style and general writing guides provide an important supplement.
- 6 See also Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 229.
- 7 Jockers has pointed out that the combination of close readings and macro-analyses is fruitful in the analysis and interpretation of general textual patterns (see Jockers, *Macroanalysis*, 26).
- 8 As Moretti argues, in literary studies this problem often leads to a delimitation of the canon (Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review* 1 (2000), 57).
- 9 As Leech and Short have also pointed out, quantitative analyses of texts can be used to affirm or reject vague indications (*Style in Fiction*, 38).
- 10 Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', 57.
- 11 Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', 57.
- 12 See also Jockers, *Macroanalysis*, 25.
- 13 Jockers, *Macroanalysis*, 27, 29.
- 14 As Jockers has argued, close reading is important for the interpretation of the data (Jockers, *Macroanalysis*, 26).
- 15 Indeed, as Igarashi has pointed out, the initial theorisation of close reading was itself shaped by *distant reading* ('Statistical Analysis at the Birth of Close Reading', 497).
- 16 Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, 56.
- 17 Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004), 67.



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## Empirical material

### *Authorial guidelines*

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